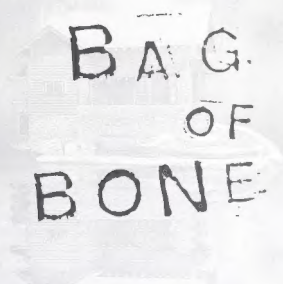




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STEPHEN KING



BAG. OF BONES

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1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

To some extent, this novel deals with the legal aspects of child custody in the State of Maine. I asked for help in understanding this subject from my friend Warren Silver, who is a fine attorney. Warren guided me carefully, and along the way he also told me about a quaint old device called the Stenomask, which I immediately appropriated for my own fell purposes. If I've made procedural mistakes in the story which follows, blame me, not my legal resource. Warren also asked me—rather plaintively—if I could maybe put a "good" lawyer in my book. All I can say is that I did my best in that regard.

Thanks to my son Owen for technical support in Woodstock, New York, and to my friend (and fellow Rock Bottom Remainder) Ridley Pearson for technical support in Ketchum, Idaho. Thanks to Pam Dorman for her sympathetic and perceptive reading of the first draft. Thanks to Chuck Verrill for a monumental editing job—your personal best, Chuck. Thanks to Susan Moldow, Nan Graham, Jack Romanos, and Carolyn Reidy at Scribner for care and feeding. And thanks to Tabby, who was there for me again when things got hard. I love you, hon.

S.K.

This is for Naomi.
Still.

Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I,
I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and
noiseless as any of these old chairs, and so I never feel so
private as when I know you are here

"Bartley."

H. RMAN MEIVILL

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again . . . As
I stood there, hushed and still, I could swear that
the house was not an empty shell but lived and
breathed as it had lived before

Rebecca

DAPHNE DU MAURIER

Mars is heaven

RAY BRADBURY

BAG
OF
BONES

CHAPTER

1

On a very hot day in August — 1994, my wife told me she was going down to the Derry Rite Aid to pick up a refill on her sinus medicine prescription — this is stuff you can lay over the counter if you do. I believe I'd finished my writing for the day and offered to pick it up for her. She said thanks, but she wanted to get a piece of fish at the supermarket next door anyway, two birds with one stone and all that. She blew a kiss at me off the palm of her hand and went out. The next time I saw her, she was on TV. That's how you identify the Rite Aid in Derry — no walking down a subterranean corridor with neon tubes on the walls and long fluorescent bars over head no milk, no sugar, hanging out at a chilly drawer on casters, you just go to a drug-free market to buy a beer and look at a TV screen and say yep or nope.

The Rite Aid and the Shopwell are less than a mile from each other in a little neighborhood strip mall which also supports a coffee store, a used-book store named Spread It Around, and a very funky business in my old paperbacks: a Radio Shack and a Fast Food. It's on Up Main Hill, at the intersection of Witcham and Jackson.

Sae parked in front of Backbaster Video, went into the drug store,

and I'd business with Mr. Joe Wyzer, who was the druggist in those days. He has since moved on to the Rite Aid in Bangor. At the checkout she picked up one of those little chocolates with marshmallow inside, this one in the shape of a mouse. I found it later, in her purse. I unwrapped it, I ate it myself sitting at the kitchen table with the contents of her red handbag spread out in front of me, and it was like taking Communion. When it was gone except for the taste of chocolate on my tongue and in my throat, I burst into tears. I sat there in the clutter of her Kleenex and no-keep-and-keys and I had finished rolls of Certs and cried with my hands over my eyes, the way a kid cries.

The sinus inhaler was in a Rite Aid bag. It had cost twelve dollars and thirteen cents. There was something else in the bag, too—an item which had cost twenty-two-fifty. I looked at this other item for a long time, seeing it out not understanding it. I was surprised, maybe even stunned, but the idea that Joanna Aron Noonan might have been leading in the life—and I know nothing about—never crossed my mind. Not then.

Just off the register, walked out into the night, hammering rain again, swapping her regular glasses for her prescription sunglasses as she did, and just as she stepped from beneath the drugstore's slight overhang (I am imagining a little here, I suppose—crossing over into the country of the unreal a little, but not by much, only by inches, and you can trust me on that—there was that strewish howl of locked tires on pavement that means there's going to be either an accident or a very close call).

This time it happened—the sort of accident which happened at that stop-and-go X-shaped intersection at least once a week, it seemed. A 1982 Toyota was pulling out of the shopping center parking lot and turning left onto Jackson Street. Behind the wheel was Mrs. Esther Easterling of Barrett's Orchards. She was accompanied by her friend Mrs. Irene Deursey, also of Barrett's Orchards, who had shopped the video store without finding anything she wanted to rent. Too much violence, Irene said. Both women were cigarette widows.

Esther could hardly have missed the orange Public Works dump truck coming down the hill, although she denied this to the police, to the newspaper, and to me when I talked to her some two months later. I think

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it. Key is that she can't do her look. As a woman, it's not like I can't do it, but I can't. He took a second to look at me, then he looked at the others and togetherness. They can't be worse than I can be.

Driving the Pat's Work truck was William Frank. Of course, Mr. Frank was thirty-eight years old, not the old man who was looking at me with his shirt off and I thinking, how bad is he? I was a little older, but I could be not necessary in that order. He had a truck that was a little over eight years old, putting down asphalt patches on the Harris Avenue road, a few miles near the airport, a hot job in a hot day and Bill Frank's truck might have been going a little too fast. I was a little older, but I was a little older. He was eager to get back to the garage, so he took the truck, and get behind the wheel of his own 1950, which was a little older. As the dump trucks, trucks, which go down to pass inspection, were a long way from the top condition. Frank, in fact, was as he saw the Toyota pull up in front of him, he was a little older, but it was too late. He heard screaming tires, his own and Frank's as simultaneously realized her danger—and saw her face for just a moment.

That was the worst part, sitting with me, looking at me as we sat on a porch, drinking beers—it was October, but the sun, although the sun was warm on our faces, we were both wearing sweaters. "You know how high up you sit in one of those dump trucks?"

I nodded.

Well, she was looking up to see me—she was a little older, but the sun was full in her face. I could see how old she was, a reminder of thinking. Holy shit, she's gonna break like glass if I don't stop. But I can't stop, I can't stop, more often than not. They can stop, so you can look at it now it turned out, both those old faces still alive, and you will.

He stopped then, bright red color flowing into his cheeks, making him look like a boy who has been laughed at in the schoolyard. I get it, who have noticed his fly is unzipped. It was a little bit, but it didn't matter, only would have confused him.

Mr. Norman, I'm sorry. My mouth just sort of came away from me.

It's all right. I told him. I'm over the worst part, anyway. That was a lie, but it put us back on track.

Anyway, he said, what if there's a car coming out of the garage

sound when the driver's side of the car caved in. Breaking glass, too. I was thrown against the wheel hard enough so I couldn't draw a breath without retching for a week or more, and I had a big bruise right here. He drew an arc on his chest just below the collarbones. I banged my head on the windshield hard enough to crack the glass, but all I got up there was a little purple knob—no bleeding, not even a headache. My wife says I've just got a naturally thick skull. I saw the woman driving the Toyota, Mrs. Easterling, thrown across the console between the front bucket seats. Then we were finally stopped, all tangled together in the middle of the street, and I got out to see how bad they were. I tell you, I expected to find them both dead."

Neither of them was dead, neither of them was even unconscious, although Mrs. Easterling had three broken ribs and a dislocated hip. Mrs. Dunsen, who had been a seat away from the impact, suffered a concussion when she rapped her head on her window. That was all—she was treated and released at Home Hospital, as the *Derry News* always puts it in such cases.

My wife, the former Johanna Arlen of Malden, Massachusetts, saw it all from where she stood outside the drugstore, with her purse slung over her shoulder and her prescription bag in one hand. Like Bud Fraker, she must have thought the occupants of the Toyota were either dead or seriously hurt. The sound of the collision had been a hollow authoritative bang which roled through the hot afternoon air like a bowling ball down an alley. The sound of breaking glass edged it like jagged lace. The two vehicles were tangled violently together in the middle of Jackson Street, the dirty orange truck looming over the pale blue import like a bullying parent over a cowering child.

Johanna began to sprint across the parking lot toward the street. Others were doing the same all around her. One of them, Miss Jill Dunsen, had been window shopping at Radio Shack when the accident occurred. She said she thought she remembered running past Johanna—at least she was pretty sure she remembered someone in yellow socks, but she couldn't be sure. By then Mrs. Easterling was screaming that she was hurt, they were both hurt, wouldn't somebody help her and her friend Irene.

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Halfway across the parking lot, her purse slipped off her shoulder and fell to the pavement. Her purse slipped on one slipper and the other slipped and slid halfway out. The other item stayed put.

No one noticed her lying there by the wayside. No one. No one was focused on the tangled vehicles, the crowd in the road, the spreading puddle of water and faint freckles on the Pavee Works man's ruptured radiator. That's gas, the car from the East Los said to everyone who would listen. That's gas that heat-sealed the tires. I suppose one or two of the would-be rescuers might've noticed it, but never, perhaps thinking Sam had fainted. He assumed so, at least for a day when the temperature was justing north-five degrees warmer than he'd have been unreasonable.

Roughly two dozen people from the shopping center clustered around the accident, another four dozen or so came running over from Strawberry Park, where a basketball game had been going on. I imagine that all the things you would expect to hear in such situations were said many of them more than once. Milling around. Someone reaching for a flashlight, massnapen hole which had been the driver's side window to pat I'd like's trembling old hand. People immediately giving way for Joe Wyzer, at such moments anyone in a white coat, a red jacket, a yellow vest, the best of the lot. In the distance, the warble of an ambulance siren rising on a shaky air over an incinerator.

And during this lying unnoticed in the parking lot, was it was with her purse still over her shoulder, inside still wrapped in the old plastic chocolate-marsamallow mase and her white prescription glasses over her outstretched hand. It was Joe Wyzer, hurrying back to the store to get a compress for Irene Dorsey's head, who spotted her. He recognized her even though she was lying face down. He recognized her by her red hair white blouse and yellow socks. He recognized her because he had waited on her not fifteen minutes before.

Mrs. No name, he asked, forgetting all about the compress that he'd sized but apparently not too badly hurt Irene Dorsey. Mrs. No name are you all right? Knowing already, or so she suspected (it was I am wrong) that she was not

He turned her over. It took both hands to do it, and even then he had to work a bit, kneeling and pushing and lifting there in the parking lot with the heat baking down from above and then bouncing back up from the asphalt. Dead people put on weight, it seems to me, both in their flesh and in our minds; they put on weight.

There were red marks on her face. When I identified her I could see them clearly even on the video monitor. I started to ask the assistant medical examiner what they were, but then I knew. Late August, hot pavement, elementary, my dear Watson. My wife died getting a sunburn.

Wyzer got up, saw that the ambulance had arrived, and ran toward it. He pushed his way through the crowd and grabbed one of the attendants as he got out from behind the wheel. "There's a woman over there," Wyzer said, pointing toward the parking lot.

"Guy, we've got two women right here, and a man as well," the attendant said. He tried to pull away, but Wyzer held on.

"Never mind them right now," he said. "They're basically okay. The woman over there isn't."

The woman over there was dead, and I'm pretty sure Joe Wyzer knew that, but he had his priorities straight. Give him that. And he was convincing enough to get both paramedics moving away from the tangle of truck and Toyota in spite of Esther Easterling's cries of pain and the rumbles of protest from the Greek chorus.

When they got to my wife, one of the paramedics was quick to confirm what Joe Wyzer had already suspected. "Holy shit," the other one said. "What happened to her?"

"Heart muscle, yep," the first one said. "She got excited and it just blew out on her."

But it wasn't her heart. The autopsy revealed a brain aneurysm which she might have been living with, a lump known, for as long as five years. As she sprinted across the parking lot toward the accident, that weak vessel in her cerebral cortex had blown like a tire, drowning her control centers in blood and killing her. Death had probably not been instantaneous, the assistant medical examiner told me, but it had still come swiftly enough, and she wouldn't have suffered. Just one big black cerebral sensation and thought gone even before she hit the pavement.

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Can I help you today, sir? Mr. N. is in the next room. Mr. N. is turning me gently away from me, still thinking I am a nuisance to him. Do you have a cigarette? I am so tired.

Just one I said I did know was the one that I had just before she died. Then I asked my question

The days came upon me then like a thief, and I was left alone. In my memory, the clearest memory I have is that night I saw a mouse and crying — crying must, I think, because I knew I was not the taste that would be gone. I had no more crying, but I was still there. We buried her, and I will tell you about that too, surely.

I was glad for the arrival of Joselyn and particularly for the arrival of my oldest brother, Frank. It was Frank Arlen, sitting at the kitchen party, and with a head of ash-darks, who had organized the arrangements—who would, in actuality, *be there* with the teacher, director

I can't believe you did that. I said later, as we sat in the pub that I was at, drinking beers.

He was trying to stick it to you. Makes no sense. I hate guys like that. He reached into his back pocket brought out a new towel and wiped absently at his cheeks with it. He hadn't broken down - none of the Ardens broke down - at least not when I was with them - but Frank had leaked yesterday - today he looked like a real sufferer of it - his eye conjunctivitis.

There had been six Arden siblings and I, the youngest and the only girl. She had been the pet of her dog brothers. I suspect that if it had had anything to do with her death, the five of them would have torn me apart with their bare hands. As it was, they formed a protective shield for me instead, and that was good. I suppose I might have muddled through without them, but I don't know how. I was thirty-six, remember? You don't expect to have to carry your wife when you're thirty-six and I could be self's two years younger. Death was the last thing on our minds.

if a gay gets caught taking your stereo and your car, take them and put him in jail," Francis said. The Arc is a correctional Massachusetts, and I could still hear Malden's Francis voice. "If you *steal* it was a *steal*, if you *take* it, it's a *take*. If the same guy steals it, it's a *steal*."

ing husband a three-thousand-dollar casket for forty-five hundred dollars, they call it business and ask him to speak at the Rotary Club luncheon. Greedy asshole. I fed him his lunch. didn't I?"

"Yes. You did."

"You okay, Mikey?"

I'm okay.

Sincerely okay.

How the fuck should I know? I asked him, loud enough to turn some heads in a nearby booth. And then: She was pregnant.

His face grew very still. "*What?*"

I struggle to keep my voice down. Pregnant. Six or seven weeks, according to the—you know, the autopsy. Did you know? Did she tell you?"

No? Christ, no. But there was a funny look on his face, as if she had told him *something*. I knew you were trying, of course—she said you had a low sperm count and it might take a little while, but the doctor thought you guys'd probably—sooner or later you'd probably— He trailed off, looking down at his hands. They can tell that, huh? They check for that?"

They can tell. As for checking, I don't know if they do it automatically or not, I asked."

"Why?"

She didn't just buy sinus medicine before she died. She also bought one of those home pregnancy-testing kits."

"You had no idea? No clue?"

I shook my head.

He reached across the table and squeezed my shoulder. She wanted to be sure, that's all. You know that, don't you?"

I bought my sinus medicine and a pack of fudge, she'd said. Looking like always. A woman off to run a couple of errands. We had been trying to have a kid for eight years, but she had looked just like always.

Sure, I said, patting Frank's hand. Sure, big guy. I know.

It was the Arcus—led by Frank—who haunted Johannes' sendoff. As the wiper of the family, I was assigned the obituary. My brother came up

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from Virginia with my mother and my aunt and was allowed to attend the guest house at the viewings. My mother, almost seventy years old at the age of sixty-six, although the doctors refused to let her leave the hospital in Memphis with her sister, two years younger and only six feet tall, was wonky. They were in charge of cutting the cake and the music at the funeral reception.

Everything else was arranged by the Ardens, including the viewings, access to the components of the funeral ceremony. Frank and Victor, the youngest and youngest brother, spoke brief tributes. Joe, the oldest and prelate for his daughter's soul. And at the end, Pete Breck gave the eulogy while standing in the summer and raked our yard in the fall, brought over my mother's tears by singing "Blessed Assurance," which Frank said had been his favorite hymn as a girl. How Frank felt that Pete and I probably weren't singing at the funeral is something I never found out.

We got through the afternoon and evening viewings on Tuesday, the funeral service on Wednesday morning, then the interment prayer at Fairlawn Cemetery. What I remember most was thinking how hot it was, how lost I felt without having Joe to talk to, how that I wished I had bought a new pair of slacks. Joe would have pestered me to death about the ones I was wearing, if she had been there.

Later on I talked to my brother, Sid, and him we went to his room and about our mother and Aunt Frances, sisters, the two of them disappeared completely into the Twilight Zone. They were too young for a nursing home, what did Sid advise?

He advised something, but I'll be damned if I know what it was, agreed to it. I remember that, but not what it was. Later that day Sid's car came, and our aunt climbed back into Sid's rented car and they drove to Boston, where they would spend the night and then go to the South-Central Crescent the following day. My mother is happy enough to come and see the old folks, but he doesn't fly, even if the tickets are free. He claims there are no break-down lanes in the sky if the engine quits.

Most of the Ardens left the next day. On Monday it was dog hot, the sun glaring out of a white haze sky and lying on everything like a great cross. They stood in front of our house, which had been the same since my house by then, with three taxis lined up at the curb, and then one

gave its nudging one another amid the litter of tote-bags and saying the final goodbyes in those foggy Massachusetts accents.

Frank stayed another day. We picked a big bunch of flowers behind the house — not those grossly smelling potpourri things whose aroma I always associate with death and organ music but real flowers, the kind Jo liked best — and stuck them in a couple of coffee cans I found in the back pantry. We went out to Fairlawn and put them on the new grave. Then we just sat there for awhile under the beating sun.

She was a way, just the sweetest thing in my life. Frank said at last in a strange, muffled voice. "We took care of Jo when we were kids. Us guys. No one messed with Jo. I'll tell you. Anyone tried, we'd feed 'em their lunch."

"She told me a lot of stories."

"Good ones?"

"Yeah, real good."

"I'm going to miss her so much."

Me too, I said. Frank — listen — I know you were her favorite brother. She never calls you a maybe just to say that she missed a period or was feeling a little waxy in the morning? You can tell me. I won't be pissed.

But she didn't. Honest to God. Was she waopsy in the morning?

Not that I saw. And that was just it. I hadn't seen *at that*. Of course I'd been writing, and when I write I pretty much trance out. But she knew where I went in those trances. She could have found me and shaken me full awake. Why hadn't she? Why would she hide good news? Not waiting to tell me until she was sure was plausible — but it somehow wasn't Jo.

"Was it a boy or a girl?" he asked.

"A girl."

Well, I had damn spoke'd out and waiting for most of our marriage. A boy would have been Andrew. Our daughter would have been Kia. Kia Jane Noonan.

Frank, day after six years and in his own, had been staying with me. On our way back to the house he said, "I worry about you, Macey. You

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never got that handy for that. It's a damn good thing I don't have to do have is far away."

"I'll be all right," I said.

He nodded. "That's what we say, anyway, isn't it?"

"We."

"Crays. I'll be all right. And it won't hurt with the fishes because he knows it. He looked at me, eyes staring wide. I can't remember his smiling, his beamed hand. It yawned not at right. Mike, in the car, he said, "I'll be all right, your brother. I saw the way you looked at him. I'll be all right, your brother. For Jo's sake if not your own."

"Okay," I said, respecting and appreciating the effort as known. I would do no such thing. I don't tell people for help. It's not because of the way I was raised, at least I can't think so. It's the way I was made. Joanna once said that if I was drowning at Dark Sea Lake, where we have a summer home, I would die sixty feet out from the pool. I beach rather than yell for help. It's not a question of love or a friend. I can give those and I can take them. I feel pain like you feel it. I want to touch and be touched. But if someone asks me, "Are you all right?" I can't answer no. I can't say help me.

A couple of days later Frank left for the southern end of the state. When he opened the car door I was startled to see that the taped book he was listening to was one of mine. He hugged me, surprised me with a kiss on the mouth, a good hard smack. It was need to talk and he said, "And if you need to be with someone, just come."

I nodded.

"And be careful."

That startled me. The combination of heat and grief that made me feel as if I had been living in a dream for the last few days, not that I got through.

"Careful of what?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know, Mike. I can't get it out of me. He was so big and it was so little that he looked like the way we were going to and it was away. The sun was going away over the Dark Sea Lake. How the sun looks at the end of a hot day in August and it's not at all somehow. *phooie* as if an invisible hand were pushing it away from me."

that even at any moment it might just pop like an overfilled mosquito and splatter all over the horizon? It was like that. In the east, where it was already dark, thunder was rambling. But there was no rain that night—only a dark that came down as thick and stifling as a blanket. All the same, I slipped in front of the word processor and wrote for an hour or so. It went pretty well, as I remember. And you know, even when it doesn't, it passes the time.

My sense of crying fit came three or four days after the funeral. That sense of being in a dream persisted—I walked, I talked, I answered the phone. I worked on my book, which had been about eighty per cent complete when Jude left—but all the time there was this clear sense of disconnection, a feeling that everything was going on at a distance from the real me, that I was more or less phoning it in.

Dense Breedlove, Pete's mother, called and asked if I wouldn't like her to bring a couple of her friends over one day the following week and give the big old Edwardian place I now lived in alone a rolling around in it like the last person a restaurant's zeppelin—a good stem to stern cleaning. They would cost, she said, for a hundred dollars split even among the three of them, and mostly because it wasn't good for me to go on without it. There had to be a scrubbing after a death, she said, even if the death didn't happen in the house itself.

I told her it was a fine idea, but I would pay her and the women she brought a hundred—furscaper for six hours' work. At the end of the six hours I wanted the job done. And that wasn't I told her, it would be done, anyway.

"Mr. Noonan, that's far too much," she said.

Maybe and maybe not, but it's what I'm paying, I said. Will you do it?"

She said she would, of course she would.

Perhaps predictably, I found myself going through the house on the evening before they came, going a pre-cleaning inspection. I guess I didn't want the women (two of whom would be complete strangers to me) finding anything that would embarrass them or me—a pair of Johnnass's box pants stuffed down behind the sofa cushions, perhaps

"We are often over the moon," Mrs. ...
 "have you noticed?" of feet. It's a little ...
 had even ...
 was looking for that ...
 over my mind. The ...
 about the end of the novel ...
 my ...
 about the North ...
 died. ...
 said. And her eyes ...

Near the end of my pre-clean age ...
 open paper sack on ...
 old lanes are so dusty as the ...
 outing, I saw ...
 Johannes face and hands ...
 ground. Did it get dusty inside ...

I pushed the thought away. It ...
 kept creeping back, like Tolstoy's white bear.

Johanna and I had both seen English ...
 Maine, and like many others I ...
 Shakespeare and the ...
 son. Yet the writer who had bound ...
 friendly poet or essayist but W. Somerset Maugham ...
 gloating novelist-playwright with the ...
 by cigarette smoke in his photographs ...
 heart. So it did not surprise me much ...
 was *The Moon and Sixpence*. I had read it myself ...
 once but twice, identifying passionately with the character of Charles Strickland. (It was writing I wrote fiction in the ...
 not painting.)

She ...
 place marker and as I ...
 said when I was first getting to know her ...
 I ...

article somewhere I was assigned, picking up the Twentieth Century Brits simply because I had time on my hands that last semester. A hundred years from now, she had said, the shame of the mid twentieth century literary critics will be that they embraced Lawrence and ignored Maugham. This was greeted with contemptuously good-natured laughter (they all knew *Winton Lord* was one of the greatest damn books ever written), but I didn't laugh. I fell in love.

The page numbers marked pages 102 and 103. Dirk Stroeve has just discovered that his wife has left him for Strickland, Maugham's version of Paul Gauden. The narrator tries to back Stroeve up. *Why don't you follow her? It won't be unhappy. She'll come back...*

Easier for you to say, I murmured to the room which now belonged just to me.

I turned the page and read this: *Strickland, a just-as-almost-as Stroeve, was a man. But he had no idea of it and he had no idea of it. He had no idea of it. Strickland was taken, a surprise and he was not a man. He was not a man. He was not a man. He was not a man. He did not exactly know how. Stroeve found himself on the floor.*

"You funny little man," said Strickland.

It occurred to me that Jo was never going to turn the page and hear Strickland call the pathetic Stroeve a funny little man. In a moment of brilliant epiphany I have never forgotten—how could I? it was one of the worst moments of my life—I understood it wasn't a mistake that would be rectified, or a dream from which I would awaken. Johanna was dead.

My strength was robbed by grief. If the bed hadn't been there, I would have taken to the floor. We weep from our eyes, it said, we can do better that evening. I felt as if every pore of my body were weeping, every crack in the masonry. I sat there on her side of the bed, with her dusty, poorly preserved copy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in my hand, and I weiled. I think it was suffering as much as pain, in spite of the corpse I had seen and identified on a high-resolution video monitor in spite of the funeral and Pete Breckley singing "Blessed Assurance" in his high, sweet tenor voice, in spite of the graveside service with its ashes to ashes and dust to dust. I hadn't really believed it. The Penguin paperback told me what the big gray coffin had not: it insisted she was dead.

BAG OF BONES

You funny little man, said Strickland

I lay back on the sofa at sunset, and I was so tired I let myself to sleep that way as children do when they're unhappy. I had an awful dream, and I woke up, saw the papers scattered all over the floor, still a light grey overcast, and I was alone. I felt that I had been left behind where I had left it. You know how it is, when you are alone. I dare not go to bed until they have put the tea away, and I had to wait.

I put the playing card book back between my legs, and I was a rain of the index finger away from the door. I was so tired I was an—river—and I fell into my side, laughing at the way I was in the bed, meaning to put the book back exactly where I had left it.

Joe was lying there, and the dust kicked. A strong light came down from the bottom of the box spring and I saw the light of the book. Her red hair looked dull, but her eyes were dark, and were not black in her white face. And when she spoke, I knew that I had been driven her insane.

Give me that, she hissed. It's my last letter. She started it out of my hand before I could offer it to her. I was on my feet, my fingers touched, and hers were as cold as twigs after a frost. She went back to her place, the playing card fluttering at an angle. She was a Maugham over her face—a shroud of woe. As she passed over him, on her bosom and lay still, I realized she was waiting for the last of us. I had buried her in. She had come out of her grave to me, and I had died.

I awoke with a muffled cry and a painful jerk that almost rained me off the side of the bed. I hadn't been asleep long—the curtains were still damp on my cheeks, and my eyelids had that thin stretch. I had my feet after a boat of weeping. The dream had been so real, and I had to roll on my side, hugging my head down, and I put the book back on the sofa. I would be there with the book over her face, and I would be there with her cold fingers to touch me.

There was nothing there, of course—dreams are just dreams. Nevertheless, I spent the rest of the night on the sofa, and I was still. It was the right choice, I guess, because there were no more of us to be there. Only the nothingness of good sleep.

CHAPTER

2

I never suffered from writer's block during the ten years of my marriage, and did not suffer it immediately after Joanna's death. I was in fact so unfamiliar with the condition that it had pretty well set in before I knew anything out of the ordinary was going on. I think this was because in my heart I believed that such conditions only affected "literary" types of the sort who are discussed, deconstructed, and sometimes dismissed in the *New York Review of Books*.

My writing career and my marriage covered almost exactly the same span. I finished the first draft of my first novel, *Butterfly*, not long after Jo and I became officially engaged (I popped an opal ring on the third finger of her left hand—a hundred and ten bucks at Day's Jewellers, and quite a bit more than I could afford at the time—but Joanna seemed utterly enthralled with it—and I finished my last novel, *Illusions of a People*, about a month after she was declared dead. This was the one about the gay novelist who wins the love of high places. It was published in the fall of 1975. I have published other novels since then—a paradox I can explain—but I don't think there'll be a Michael Noonan novel in any

BAG OF BONES

I sit in the rescuee's future. I know what writers do. I know what I don't. I know more about it than I ever wanted to.

When I hesitantly showed Jo the first draft of *Life on a Street* one evening, curled up where I've been ever waiting, not in bed, in a chair, and a tee-shirt with the Maine duck deer on the front, a beer in one hand, a beer glass oficed tea in the other, I went out to the garage two weeks later, in Bangor with another couple on a shaky truck, and the bones were there. I mean, Jo and I weren't even married at that point, and yet, as far as I know, that opal ring never left her finger, not scattered in a messy, feeling like a guy in a New Yorker cartoon, one of those about an untidy fellow in the delivery waiting room. As I remember, I tucked it up as simple as a child-can-do-it birdhouse kit and a most out of the index finger of my left hand. Every twenty minutes or so, I'd go back and peek at Jo. If she noticed, she gave no sign. I took that as a good sign.

I was sitting on the back stoop, looking up at the stars, or stargazing, when she came out, sat down beside me, and put her hand on the back of my neck.

"Well?" I said.

"It's good," she said. "Now why don't you come inside and do me. An' I'll tell you I could answer, the parties she had been wearing it, pulled in my lap in a little whisper of nylon."

Afterward, lying in bed and eating oranges, as we ate after, after we, I asked her: "Good as in publishable?"

"Well," she said. "I don't know anything about the glamour world of publishing, but I've been reading for pleasure a lot, and I think *George* was my first love, if you want to know—"

"I don't."

She leaned over and popped an orange segment at my mouth, her breast warm and provocative against my arm, and I read it as with great pleasure. My prediction is that your career is a reporter for the *Daily News*, surviving to survive its rockiest stage. I think I'm going to be a novelist's wife."

rim. The crazy old trouser man, she never put a date on the cover of those days as if it is there was a date. *Ha!* I was so happy when you happy when you write, Mike?’

‘Sure.’ It was what she knew, anyway.

‘And does your conscience bother you when you write?’

When I write, there’s nothing I hate to do except to lie. I rolled on top of her.

Oh dear, she said in that prissy little voice that I was so fond of. ‘There’s a penis between us.’

And as we made love, I realized a wonderful thing or two. First, she meant it when she said she really liked my book. I felt I knew what she liked it just from the way she sat in the wing chair, looking at with a look of admiration over her brow and her bare legs tucked beneath her. And that I didn’t need to be ashamed of what I had written. It was in her eyes, at least. And one other wonderful thing. Her perception of me, with no eyes to make the true binocular vision of things, which, it allows, was the only perception that mattered.

Thank God she was a Maugham fan.

I was V.C. Andrews with a prick for ten years – fourteen if you ask me the post-Johanna years. The first five were with Random, then my agent got a huge offer from Putnam and I jumped.

You’ve seen my name in a lot of bestseller lists – that’s about Sandy paper carries a list that goes up to fifteen, instead of just listing the top ten. I was never a Caneby Latham, or Grisham, or a good fair number of hardcovers. V.C. Andrews never did. Harold O’Dowd, my agent, told me once, the day was pretty much a success as place number one and once got as high as number five on the *Time* cover. It was with my second book, *The K-Z-S’s*, *Man*. Ironically, it was the books that kept me from going higher was *Sally*, *Man*, by The Belmonts twinning as George Stark. The Belmonts had a house on Lake Castle Rock back in those days, not even fifty miles or so from where Dark Score Lake. That’s dead now. Sally, I don’t know what it has to do with writer’s block or not.

I stood just outside the magic circle of the major bestsellers and I was

Her words rattled me—actually brought goosebumps out on my arms. No one didn't know anything about the glamorous world of publishing, but if she believed, I believed—and belief turned out to be the right course. I got an agent through my old creative writing teacher who read my novel and damned it with faint praise, seeing its commercial qualities as a kind of literary, I think, and the agent sold *Button, Twine* to Random House, the first publisher to see it.

Joe was right about my career as a reporter, as well. I spent four months—during flower shows, drag races, and bean suppers at about a thousand a week before my first check from Random House came in—\$1,100—after the agent's commission had been deducted. I wasn't in the newsroom long enough to get even that first minor bump in salary, but they had a going-away party for me just the same. At Jack's Pub, this was, now that I think of it. There was a banner hang over the tables in the back room which said *GO TO IT, K. MIKE—W. K. T. ON!* Later, when we got home, Juliana said that if envy was acid, there would have been nothing left of me but my belt-buckle and three teeth.

Later, in bed with the lights out—the last orange eaten and the last cigarette shared—I said, "No one's ever going to confuse it with *Look Homeward, Angel*, are they?" My book, I meant. She knew it, just as she knew I had been fairly depressed by my old creative writing teacher's response to *Twine*.

"You aren't going to pull a lot of frustrated artist crap on me—are you?" she asked, getting up on my elbow. "If you are, I wish you'd tell me now so I can pick up one of those do-it-yourself divorce kits first thing in the morning."

I was amused, but also a little hurt. "Did you see that first press release from Random House?" I knew she had. "They're just about calling me V. C. Andrews with a prick, for God's sake."

Well, she said, rightly grabbing the object in question—your dick, I think. As far as what they're calling you—Mike, when I was in third grade, Patty Hannigan used to call me a booger nucker. But I wasn't. "Perception is everything."

Bullshit. She was still holding my dick and now gave it a formidable squeeze that hurt a little and felt absolutely wonderful at the same

in fact that. We owned two homes by the time I was thirty-one: the lovely old Edwardian in Derry and—in western Maine, a lakeside log home almost big enough to be called a lodge—that was Sara Laughs, so called by the locals for nearly a century. And we owned both places free and clear at a time of life when many couples consider themselves lucky just to have taught their way to mortgage approval on a starter home. We were healthy, rich, and with our fun bones still really attached. I wasn't Thomas Wolfe—not even Tom Wolfe or Tobias Wolff's, but I was being paid to do what I loved, and there's no gig on earth better than that, it's like a license to steal. I was what midlist fiction used to be in the forties: critically ignored genre literature. In my case the genre was *Lovely Young Woman on Her Own Meets Fascinating Strangers*—but well compensated and with the kind of shabby acceptance accorded to state-sanctioned whorehouses in Nevada, the feeling seeming to be that some outlet for the baser instincts should be provided and someone had to do *That Sort of Thing*. I did *That Sort of Thing* enthusiastically (and sometimes with Jo's enthusiastic connivance), and I came to a particularly problematic plot crossroads, and at some point around the time of George Bush's election, our accountant told us we were millionaires.

We weren't rich enough to own a jet (Grisnam) or a pro football team (Clatsco), but by the standards of Derry, Maine, we were quite rolling in it. We made love thousands of times, saw thousands of movies, read thousands of books. Jo stirring hers under her side of the bed at the end of the day, more often than not. And perhaps the greatest blessing was that we never knew how short the time was.

More than once I wondered if forsaking the ritual's swatting to the writer's block. In the day time, I could dismiss this as supernatural twaddle, but at night that was harder to do. At night your thoughts have an unpleasant way of slipping their collars and running free. And if you've spent most of your adult life making fetters, I'm sure those collars are even looser and the gods are eager to wear them. Was it Shaw or Oscar Wilde who said a writer was a man who had taught his mind to misbehave?

And isn't it really so far fetched to think that breaking the ritual might have played a part in my sudden and unexpected (unexpected by me, at

a story end? When I ask myself that, I don't actually know the answer. I live between what is and what seems to be. I know that Parfitts sometimes refused to paint with oil watercolors, and that I, too, as a painter, I never would. It is, well, with oil, I can do it, I know.

The mood started with the second book, *Vanitas*, and I remember working nervously about it. I suppose I was conscious of that's plenty more in this stuff than I can do, but I'm going to do it, I think. I remember an American literature professor telling me that of all the American writers, only Harper Lee, yet, and I do. I kept away from the second-book blues.

When I reached the end of *The Red Sea*, Ma and I stopped just short of finishing. The Edwardian in Bentin Street in Derby was still working in the future at that point, but we had purchased Satchel and the place in Dark Sea, not anywhere near as furnished as it later would be. His stage, not yet built, but nice, and that's where we were.

I pushed back from my typewriter. I was still clinging to a first IBM Selectric in those days, and went into the kitchen. It was now September, most of the summer people were gone, and the hanging of the blinds on the lake seemed inexpressibly lovely. The sun was going down, and the lake itself had become a still and heartless sheet of fire. This is one of the most vivid memories I have, so clear I can imagine I could step right into it and live it all again. What things—any would I do differently? I sometimes wonder about that.

Early that evening I had put a bottle of Lattinger and two others in the fridge. Now I took them out, put them in a tray that was usually employed to transport pitchers of ice tea or kool-Aid from the kitchen to the deck, and carried it before the ant on the living floor.

Joanna was deep in her ratty old easy chair, reading a book on the Marquise that night, but William Denbrough was one of her other poetry favorites. "One," she said, looking up and making a reply. "Come, my love, what's the occasion?" As if you understand, she didn't know.

"I'm done," I said. "*Mon livre est tout fini.*"

Well, she said, smiling and taking one of the plates I had set down to her with the tray, "then *that's* all right, isn't it?"

I realize now that the essence of that talk—the part that is so

and powerful like the one true magic word in a mouthful of gabberish was that phrase. We almost always had champagne, and she almost always came into the office with me afterward for the other thing, but not always.

On a five years or so before she died, she was in Ireland vacationing with a girlfriend, when I finished a book. I drank the champagne by myself that time, and entered the last line by myself as well (by then I was using a Macintosh which did a billion different things and which I use if for anyone, and never lost a minute's sleep over it). But I called her at the inn where she and her friend Bryn were staying, I told her I had finished, and I listened as she said the words I'd called to hear—words that slipped into an Irish telephone line, traveled to a microwave transmitter, rose like a prayer to some satellite, and then came back down to my ear. "Well, then *that's* all right, isn't it?"

This custom began, as I say, after the second book. When we'd each had a glass of champagne and a refill, I took her into the office, where a single sheet of paper still stuck out of my forest-green Seacrest. On the lake, one last moon cried down dark, that call that always sounds to me like something rusty turning slowly in the wind.

"I thought you said you were done," she said.

Everything but the last line, I said. The book, such as it is, is dedicated to you, and I want you to put down the last bit.

She didn't laugh or protest or get gussy just looked at me to see if I really meant it. I nodded that I did, and she sat in my chair. She had been swimming earlier, and her hair was pulled back and threaded through a white elastic thing. It was wet, and two shades darker red than usual. I touched it. It was like touching damp silk.

Paragraph, agent—she asked, as seriously as a girl from the steno pool about to take dictation from the big boss.

No, I said, this continues. And then I spoke the line I'd been holding in my head ever since I got up to pour the champagne. "He slipped the car in over her head, and then the two of them walked down the steps to where the car was parked."

She typed it, then looked around and up at me expectantly. "That's it," I said. "You can write The End, I guess."

Joan took the snail and two other little ones and I put them under the last few centimetres of the RMS Caterpillar's tail, which was a bit of a spring for the letters in the clock at home.

With the children wailing over her dead snail, she said
 "You'll have to read the book to find out."

With her sitting in my desk chair and me standing just behind her, it was a perfect position to pat her face where she could feel it. With her snail under her lips moved against the most sensitive part of me. The rest of me was in cotton shorts between us and that was all.

"Ve haff vays off making you talk," she said.

"I'll just bet you do," I said.

I at least made a stab at the ritual on the day I finished *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Sea*. I felt no low form from which the magical substance had departed, but I do expect that I do it out of superstition out of respect and love. A kind of memorial, you would say. Or, at least, as Johanna's real funeral service finally taking place, months after she was in the ground.

It was the last third of September, and still not in the hottest late summer I can remember. A scolding that time said snail on the book. I kept thinking how much I missed her. I was at that time doing the same down. And here's something else: hot as it was in Derry, I did not use any work I in nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. I never wore them and I was going to our place at the lake. It was as if my memory of Sara Lacas had been entirely wiped from my mind. Perhaps that was accurate. At the time I finished *Up to*, that truth was finally sinking in. She was not in Ireland this time.

My office at the lake is tiny, but has a view. The office in Derry is not book-lined and windowless. On this particular evening, the velvet curtains (there are three of them) were up and padding on the sofa. It came in dressed in shorts, a tee shirt, and rubber dungs and was carrying a tin Coke tray with the bottle of champagne and the two little glasses on it. At the far end of that room I could see the line that divides steel and mud in almost crochets, as not a large one and always a step over the years I'd also had to withstand. I saw notes that I'd posted. I

any late worst place in the room for a workstation) the screen of my Macintosh glowed with words.

I thought I was probably inviting another storm of grief — maybe the worst storm — but I went ahead anyway — and our emotions always surprise us, don't they? There was no weeping and wailing that night, I guess all that was out of my system. Instead there was a deep and wretched sense of loss — the empty chair where she used to like to sit and read, the empty table where she would always set her glass too close to the edge.

I poured a glass of champagne, let the foam settle, then picked it up. 'I'm done, Joe,' I said as I sat there beneath the padding fans. 'So *that's* all right, isn't it?'

There was no response. In light of all that came later, I think that's worth repeating — there was no response. I didn't sense — as I later did — that I was not alone in a room which appeared empty.

I drank the champagne, put the glass back on the Coke tray, then tried the other one. I took it over to the Mac and sat down where Johanna would have been sitting, if not for everyone's favorite loving God. No weeping and wailing — but my eyes prickled with tears. The words on the screen were these:

today wasn't so bad, she supposed. She crossed the grass to her car, and laughed when she saw the white square of paper under the windshield. Cam Delancey, who refused to be discouraged, or to take no for an answer, had invited her to another of his Thursday-night wine-tasting parties. She took the paper, started to tear it up, then changed her mind and stuck it in the hip pocket of her jeans, instead.

No paragraph indent, I said, 'this continues.' Then I keyboarded the line I'd been working in my head ever since I got up to get the champagne. There was a whole world out there; Cam Delancey's wine-tasting was as good a place to start as any.

BAG OF BONES

I stopped looking at the old Taittinger corks. It was as if I'd
pricked up at the corners of my eyes and I realized that there were a
dozen more meanings in so little. Finally, I took my eyes off the
corks twice. I clicked on the sink I'd pulled out of the counter top
of prose. I read I toasted this room with what I'd called a glass of
glass of champagne.

Here's to you, I said. I wish you were here. I wish you were
here. My voice wavered a little, but it was over. I wish you were
drank the Taittinger, saw my final face, the day, the storm, the
worst of the psychosis then I'd had the day. A day, the day, the
every lists, and checks that was the last writing I'd left for you.

CHAPTER

3

My publisher didn't know, my editor Debra Weinstock didn't know, my agent Harold Oskowski didn't know. Frank Arlen didn't know, either, although on more than one occasion I had been tempted to tell him. *Let's say it's not for Frank, just in case if it's not for me*, he told me on the day he went back to his printing business and mostly solitary life in the southern Maine town of Santerville. I had never expected to take him up on that, and didn't know it in the elemental cry-for-help way he might have been thinking about it—but I phoned him every couple of weeks or so. Guy-talk, you know. *How's it going? No for you, did as a tell him that. Yeah, back to Yankee City, don't Boston if I can get Boston tickets. Maybe text a picture of me to you. Like you want to see me? Okay. Frank keep your wee-wee in the teepee.* Guy-talk.

I'm pretty sure that once or twice he asked me if I was working on a new book, and I think I said:

Oh, yes, that's a little okay? One songtown that now I'm even telling it to myself. He asked, all right, and I always said yeah, I was working on a new book, it was going good, real good. I was tempted more than once to tell him *I can't write this for anyone, a friend, a book, tell*

pay his share in time. Also, there's always *one* fan attention when you take a long. Can't be helped. Just as if you publish too much, there are readers who'll say, "Paw, I've had enough of this guy for awhile, it's all starting to taste like beans."

I tell you all this so you'll understand how I could spend four years using my computer as the world's most expensive Scrabble board, and not—ever—suspected. Writer's block? What writer's block? We don't get no steenkay writer's block. How could anyone think such a thing when there was a new Michael Noonan suspense novel appearing each fall just like clockwork, perfect for your late-summer pleasure reading racks, and by the way don't forget that the holidays are coming and that all your relatives would also probably enjoy the new Noonan, which can be had at Borders at a thirty per cent discount, by way, such a deal.

The secret is simple, and I am not the only popular novelist in America who knows it—if the rumors are correct. Danielle Steel, to name just one, has been using the Noonan Formula for decades. You see, although I have published a book a year starting with *Beneath the Skin* in 1984, I wrote *two* books in four of those ten years, publishing one and ratholing the other.

I don't remember ever talking about this with Joe, and since she never asked, I always assumed she understood what I was doing, saving up nuts. It wasn't writer's block I was thinking. I thought, Shit, I was just having fun.

By February of 1993, after crashing and burning with at least two good books (that particular function—the *Leak* thing—was never stopped, which creates its own special version of acid), I could no longer deny the obvious: I was in the worst sort of trouble a writer can get into, during Alzheimer's or a cataclysmic stroke. Still, I had four cardboard manuscript boxes in the big safe deposit box I keep up at Fidelity Union. They were marked *Project 1*, *Project 2*, and *Project 3*. Around Valentine's Day my agent called, moderately nervous. "I usually delivered my latest masterpiece to you by January, and here it was already half-gone February. They would have to crash production to get this year's Mike Noonan out in time for the annual Christmas buying orgy. Was everything all right?"

This was my first chance to say things were a country mile from all

right to let Mr. Harold O'Rowan (CPS Publications) know how much I loved this style. He was a good friend I learned in publishing circles sometimes by the skin of my teeth, but he didn't let it will to go. I was not a good writer, I streaked lines where the joints were actually very tight. I freaked and been in the next plane. There, ready, I was a mortal mortal, and many of his friends were not. I was a valuable member of my ages. No, I was. He had a great time with thirty-eight a floor of the world's largest view of the East Side.

I told him what we were doing. He did a little more, and he finished the new one, going straight, new out that I was not. It's you'll have it tomorrow. Harold assured me solemnly that there was no come out about it, that where his writers were, a good deal of his pathos. Then he congratulated me and hugged me. Two days later I received his bequest, every bit as full as the same as the ones Jimmy Hollywood ascots.

After putting the flowers in the living room, where I had been sitting, I went down to Fidelity Union. I used to work there, and I used his, and soon enough I was in my way to Fidelity with the name of *Old Time*. I took the most recent book, and it was the one closest to the front of the box, that's all. In November it was published just in time for the Christmas rush. I dedicated it to the memory of my late, beloved wife. I had a lot of work to do even in the *Love* bestseller list, and every one went home happy. I was a little sad, things would get better, wouldn't they? No one had *terminal* writer's block, did they, well, with the possible exception of Harper Lee. All I had to do was relax, as the editor suggested, and then I was happy. And thank God I had been a good square and so, I was happy.

I was still optimistic the following year when I wrote *Love* to the *Teatra*, Express office with *Love* to the *Teatra*. It was a little in the fall of 1951, and had been one of the best of the Optimist. I was quite a little bit by March 1952, when I wrote through the same step with *Love* to the *Teatra*, although when I wrote the next was going. Writing my good books, I was the existence was just a secret, a little bit of the best and I was answered. I was a little bit, I was a

lots of good books lately, they're pouring out of me like shit out of a cow's ass.

After Harold had read *Daisy* and pronounced it my best ever, a best seller which was also *reason*, I hesitantly broached the idea of taking a year off. He responded immediately with the question I detest above all others: was I all right? Sure, I told him, fine as freckles, just thinking about easing off a little.

There followed one of those patented Harold Oblowski silences, which were meant to convey that you were being a terrific asshole—but because Harold liked you so much, he was trying to think of the gentlest possible way of telling you so. This is a wonderful trick, but one I saw through about six years ago. Actually, it was *Jo* who saw through it. He saw my pretending compassion, she said. "Actually, he's like a cop in one of those old *Lone Star* movies, keeping his mouth shut so you'll blunder ahead and end up confessing to everything."

This time I kept my mouth shut—just switched the phone from my right ear to my left and rocked back a little farther in my office chair. When I did, my eye fell on the framed photograph over my computer—Sara Laughs, our place on Dark Scott Lake. I hadn't been there in eons, and for a moment I consciously wondered why.

Then Harold's voice—cautious, comforting, the voice of a sane man trying to make a lunatic out of what he hopes will be no more than a passing delusion—was back in my ear. "That might not be a good idea, Mike—not at this stage of your career."

This isn't a stage, I said. I peaked in 1971—since then, my sales haven't really gone up or down. This is a *plateau*, Harold.

Yes, he said, "and writers who've reached that steady state really may have two choices in terms of sales—they can continue as they are, or they can go down."

Shit! I thought it saying—but didn't. I didn't want Harold to know exactly how deep this went, or how shaky the ground under me was. I didn't want him to know that I was now having heart palpitations—yes, I mean it's literally—almost every time I opened the Word Six program on my computer and looked at the blank screen and flashing cursor.

why I never used my place anymore. I'd only been down two or three times since Joe's death and not a single overnight. Good thing Bill didn't ask because I don't know what answer I would have given him. I hadn't even really thought about Sara Laughs until my conversation with Harold.

Thinking of Harold, I looked away from the photo and back at the phone. Imagined saying to him: *So I go down to what? The world comes to at me? Please. It's not as if I had a wife and family to support, the credited author of best-selling books. Let it go, please or even if you don't please, and the book does it all. I don't want to know what it does out I don't care, too fame-obsessed, too worried who fills the lower slots on the Times bestseller list can be said to be for me, and I don't fall asleep dreaming I wrote the sale. So why? Why does it even bother me?*

But that last one I *didn't* answer. Because it felt like giving up. Because without my wife and my work, I was a superfluous man living alone in a big house that was all paid for, doing nothing but the newspaper crossword over lunch.

I pushed on with what passed for my life. I forgot about Sara Laughs for some part of me that didn't want to go there, buried the idea, and spent another sweltering, miserable summer in Derry. I put a cruciverbalist program in my PowerBook and began making my own crossword puzzles. I took an interim appointment on the local YMCA's board of directors and judged the Summer Arts Competition in Waterville. I did a series of TV ads for the local homeless shelter, which was staggering toward bankruptcy, then served on *that* board for awhile. (At one public meeting of this latter board a woman called me a friend of degenerates, to which I replied, 'Thanks! I needed that.' This resulted in a loud outburst of applause which I still don't understand.) I tried some one-on-one counselling and gave it up after five appointments, deciding that the counsellor's problems were far worse than mine. I sponsored an Asian child and bowled with a league.

Sometimes I tried to write, and every time I did, I looked up. Once, when I tried to force a sentence or two (any sentence or two, just as long as they came fresh & kicked out of my own head), I had to grab the wastebasket and vomit into it. I vomited until I thought it was going to kill

me – and I, I have literally crawled over the floor to get to the computer, padding most tact so the deep pile rug on the floor would not tell the tale. I got to the other side of the room, it was better I say, and I look back over my shoulder at the VDU screen. I just – I don't know – if I later that day I approached it with my – I was sitting at it.

More and more often during those late summer evenings I remember Dennis Carville, the creative writing teacher who – I helped – I met with Harold and who had damned *Black Fox* with such a flourish. Carville once said something I never forget, attributing it to Thomas Hardy, the Victorian novelist and poet. Perhaps Hardy – I suspect that I've never found it repeated, not in *Black Fox* – not in the bibliography I read between the publications of *After the last summer* and *Forgetting Beatrix* – I have an idea Carville may have made it up himself, and then attributed it to Hardy in order to give it more weight. Anyway I have used myself from time to time. I'm ashamed to say.

In any case, I thought about it quite more and more as I struggled with the panic in my body and the frozen feeling in my mind that a total *lock-up* feeling. It seemed to sum up my despair and my growing certainty that I would never be able to write again, what a tragedy. V.C. Andrews with a prick forced by writer's block. It was this cure that suggested any effort I made it – better my situation might be meaningless even if it succeeded.

According to gloomy old Dennison Carville, the aspiring novelist should understand from the outset that her/his goals were far more beyond his reach – that the job was an exercise in futility. Compared to the dullest human being actually walking about on the face of the earth and casting his shadow there, Hardy supposedly said, the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is but a bag of bones. I must stress that because that was what I felt like in those interminable, useless, unproductive days, a bag of bones.

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again

If there is any more beautiful and – I said it once first in a *Fieldwork* column I've never read it. And it was a line that came to this – I wrote it in the tail of 1997 and the winter of 1998. I didn't know it. My work – I

course, but of Sara Laughs, which Jo sometimes called "the hide out." A far enough description, I guess, for a place so far up in the western Maine woods that it's not really even in a town at all, but in an unincorporated area designated on state maps as TR 90.

The rest of these dreams was a nightmare, but until that one they had a kind of surreal simplicity. They were dreams I'd awake from wanting to turn on the bedroom light so I could reconfirm my place in reality before going back to sleep. You know how the air feels before a thunderstorm, how everything gets still and coats seem to stand out with the brilliance of things seen during a high fever? My winter dreams of Sara Laughs were like that, each leaving me with a feeling that was not quite sickness. *I remember death of winter* by I would think sometimes, and sometimes I would lie in bed with the light on, listening to the wind outside, looking into the bedroom's shadowy corners, and thinking that Rebecca de Winter hadn't drowned in a bay boat in Dark Shore Lake. That she had gone down, gurgling and flailing, her strange black eyes full of water, while the men cried out indifferently in the twilight. Sometimes I would get up and drink a glass of water. Sometimes I just turned off the light after I was once more sure of where I was, rolled over on my side again, and went back to sleep.

In the daytime I rarely thought of Sara Laughs at all, and it was only much later that I realized something's badly out of whack when there is such a dichotomy between a person's waking and sleeping lives.

I think that Harold Oolowski's call in October of 1997 was what kicked off the dreams. Harold's ostensible reason for calling was to congratulate me on the impending release of *Dan's Abasco*, which was entertaining as hell and which also contained some extremely thought-provoking stuff. I suspected he had at least one other item on his agenda—Harold usually does—and I was right. He'd had lunch with Debra Weinstein, my editor the day before, and they had gotten talking about the fall of 1998.

"Look, now look," he said, meaning the fall lists, meaning specifically the *June* list of the fall lists. And there are some surprise additions—Dean Koontz—"

"I thought he usually published in January," I said.

He looks out Delrae's door this morning. He's got a lot of stuff to do, or something. Also, it's five. He's not in. It's a "Big deal."

Rebbonstein has his fans. Mike Scull has his fans. As a writer, I've pointed out on more than one occasion that writers are not gods.

Uh-huh. I swear that the response to the short story I wrote for my fanzine caught a glimpse of the truth. And I wish I had thrown my desk when I did. I would be writing it right now, lengthening the story that night in my dreams. Although I don't know for certain. I know then was that I wished for a mighty fist that Harolds would would hurry up and get to the point.

"I sense impatience. Michael, my boy. Harolds . . . Did he come to your desk? Are you writing?"

Just I rushed for the day, I said. I am thinking about each of you. I'll be quick, he promised, but hang with me. This is important. There may be as many as five other writers that we can expect publishing next fall. Ken Follett . . . it's supposed to be his best since *The Needle* . . . Belva Plain . . . John Jakes . . .

"None of those guys plays tennis on my court. I said although I knew that was not exactly Harold's point. Harold's point was that there are only fifteen slots on the *Times* list.

"How about Jean Auel, finally publishing the best of the six million the-cave people epics?"

I sat up. "Jean Auel? Really?"

Well . . . not a hundred percent, but it looks good. Last year, not least, a new Mary Higgins Clark. I know what tennis court is a place, and so do you."

If I'd gotten that sort of news six or seven years earlier, when I still had a great deal more to protest, I would have been treating Mary Higgins Clark *but* play on the same court shared exactly the same—she would not let our publishing schedules had been the same. It was a piece of each other's way . . . which was to my benefit, for I had to be sure you. Going nose to nose, you would cream me. As the old Lin Crane so wisely observed, you don't tug on Superman's cape, you tug on the wind, you don't pull the mask off that old Iron Knight.

and you don't mess around with Mary Higgins Clark. Not if you're Michael Noonan, anyway.

"How did this happen?" I asked.

I don't think my tone was particularly ominous, but Harold replied a tad nervously, stumbling all-over-his-own words as if a man who suspects he may be fired or even beheaded for bearing evil tidings.

"I don't know. She just happened to get an extra idea this year, I guess. That does happen, I've been told."

As a fellow who had taken his share of double-dips I knew it did, so I simply asked Harold what he wanted. It seemed the quickest and easiest way to get him to relinquish the phone. The answer was no surprise, what he and Debra *both* wanted—not to mention all the rest of my Putnam pals—was a book they could publish in late summer of '88, thus getting in front of Ms. Clark and the rest of the competition by a couple of months. Then, in November, the Putnam sales reps would give the novel a healthy second push, with the Christmas season in mind.

So they *do*, I replied. Like most novelists (and in this regard the successful are no different from the unsuccessful, indicating there might be some merit to the idea as well as the usual free-floating paranoia), I never trusted publishers' promises.

I think you can believe them on this, Mike. *Detective Adulter* was the last book of your old contract, remember. Harold sounded almost sprightly at the thought of forthcoming contract negotiations with Debra Weinstein and Phyllis Grann at Putnam. "The big thing is they still like you. They'll like you even more, I think, if they saw pages with your name on them before Thanksgiving."

"They want me to give them the next book in November? Next month?" I injected what I hoped was the right note of incredulity into my voice, just as if I hadn't had *Helen's Problem* in a safe deposit box for almost eleven years. It had been the first nat I had stored, it was now the only nat I had left.

"Not if you could give until January fifteen, at least," he said, trying to sound magnanimous. I found myself wondering where he and Debra had gotten their ranch. Some fly place. I would have bet my life on that. Maybe Four Seasons. Jonanna always used to call that place

Franka Val and the Earl of Seasons. It means like, 'They're not even a nation yet, how can you crash it, but they're willing to do it.' The question is whether or not *you* could crash production."

"I think I could, but it's custom," I said. "Tell them to do whatever's being like same-day service on your dry cleaning."

"Oh, what a rotten shame for them!" Harold snapped as if he were maybe picking off and had reached the point where Old Father Time starts and everybody snaps their Instamatics.

"How much do you think—"

A surcharge tacked on to the advance is probably the way to go, I said. They'd get pouty of course, claim that the move is in your interest, too. *Primarily* in your interest, even. But based on the extra work argument . . . the midnight oil you'll have to burn . . .

The mental agony of creation—the pangs of premature birth.

Right—right—I think a ten percent surcharge sounds about right. He spoke adroitly, like a man trying to be just as damned tactful as possible, could. Myself, I was wondering how many women would notice him a month or so early if they got paid two or three hundred grand extra for doing so. Probably some questions are best left unanswered.

And in my case, what difference did it make? The go-f-for-Ham thing was written, wasn't it?

"Well, see if you can make the deal," I said.

"Yes, but I don't think we want to be talking about just a single book here, okay? I think . . ."

"Harold, what I want right now is to eat some lunch."

"You sound a little tense, Michael. Is everything—"

"Everything is fine. Talk to them about just one book, with a sweetener for speeding up production at my end. Okay?"

Okay? I said, after one of his most significant pauses. But I hope this doesn't mean that you won't cater to a three or four book contract later on. Make hay while the sun shines, remember. It's a matter of champions.

Cross each bridge when you come to it is the motto of champions, I said, and that night I dreamt I went to Sara Laugh's again.

* * *

In that dream — in all the dreams I had that fall and winter — I am walking up the lane to the lodge. The lane is a two-mile loop through the woods with ends opening onto Route 68. It has a number at either end of lane. Forty-two, if it matters (in case you have to call in a fire, but no name). Nor did I, and I never give it one, not even between ourselves. It is narrow, really just a double rut with timothy and witchgrass growing in the crown. When you drive on, you can hear that grass whispering like low voices against the undercarriage of your car or truck.

I don't drive in the dream, though. I never drive. In these dreams I walk.

The trees huddle in close on either side of the lane. The darkening sky overhead is little more than a slot. Soon I will be able to see the first peeping stars. Sunset is past. Crickets chir. Loons cry on the lake. Small things — chipmunks, probably, or the occasional squirrel — rustle in the woods.

Now I come to a dirt driveway sloping down the hill on my right. It is our driveway, marked with a little wooden sign which reads SARA LATHES. I stand at the head of it, but I don't go down. Below is the lodge. It's all logs and added-on wings, with a deck jutting out behind. Fourteen rooms in all, a ridiculous number of rooms. It should look ugly and awkward, but somehow it does not. There is a brave dowager quality to Sara, the look of a lady pressing resolutely on toward her hundredth year, still taking pretty good strides in spite of her arthritic hips and gumpy old knees.

The central section is the oldest, dating back to 1900 or so. Other sections were added in the thirties, forties, and sixties. Once it was a hunting lodge, for a brief period in the early seventies it was home to a small commune of transcendental hippies. These were lease or rental deals, the owners from the late forties until 1984 were the Hingermans, Darren and Minnie — then Marie alone when Darren died in 1971. The only visible addition from our period of ownership is the tiny DSS dish mounted on the central roofpeak. That was Joanna's idea, and she never really got a chance to enjoy it.

Beyond the noise, the lake glimmers in the afterglow of sunset. The driveway I see is carpeted with brown pine needles and littered with fallen branches. The bushes which grow on either side of it have run wild, reaching out to each other like lovers across the narrowed gap which separates

clump. I raise my hand to brush it away and see there is a snallow cat, fairly recent, running across the back, just beyond the knuckles. Sometimes this cat is in my right hand, sometimes it's on the left. I think, *If this is a dream, the details are good.* Always that same thought: *If this is a dream, the details are good.* It's the absolute truth. They are a novelist's details. Out in dreams, perhaps everyone is a novelist. How is one to know?

Now Sara Laugus is only a dark hulk down below, and I realize I don't want to go down there anyway. I am a man who has trained his mind to misbehave, and I can imagine too many things waiting for me inside. A rabbit raccoon crouched in a corner of the kitchen. Bats in the bathroom. If disturbed they'll crowd the air around my cringing face, squeaking and fluttering against my cheeks with their dusty wings. Even one of William Denbrough's famous Creatures from Beyond the Universe, now hiding under the porch and watching me approach with glittering, pus-rimmed eyes.

Well, I can't stay up here, I say, but my legs won't move, and it seems I *will* be staying up here, where the driveway meets the lane, that I will be staying up here, like it or not.

Now the rustling in the woods behind me sounds not like small animals, most of them would by then be nested or burrowed for the night, anyway, but approaching footsteps. I try to turn and see, but I can't even do that . . .

and that was where I usually woke up. The first thing I always did was to turn over, establishing my return to reality by demonstrating to myself that my body would once more obey my mind. Sometimes—most times, actually—I would find myself thinking *Murderer, I hate dream (wake) Murderer*. There was something creepy about this (there's something creepy about any repeating dream). I think, about knowing your subconscious is digging obsessively at some object that won't be dislodged, but I would be lying if I didn't add that some part of me enjoyed the breathless summer calm in which the dream always wrapped me, and that part also enjoyed the sadness and foreboding I felt when I awoke. There was an exotic strangeness to the dream that was missing from my waking life, now that the road leading out of my imagination was so effectively blocked.

BAG OF BONES

The other night I remember I caught a dream that I am sure I never don't completely trust any of those dream-visions I have seen. They all seem to exist at 110 West when I visit them, and they all come exactly into the dark of my bedroom. Some of them don't let me get me something in the words' passage of time. It wasn't the words themselves that frightened me so much as the in which they were spoken. It was the voice of a man on the radio, in a panic, and hardly seemed like my own voice at all.

Two days before Christmas of 1977 I once more received word that I had a Union where once more the bank manager wanted to put my safe deposit box in the fluorescent light bulbs. As we walked down the stairs he assured me (for the dozenth time at least) that this was a *real* man of my work, and I read all my books couldn't get enough for the dozenth time at least. I replied that now I must get *more* in my clutches. He responded with his usual check, I thought of this as repeated exchange as Banker's Communion.

Mr. Quinlan inserted his key in Slot A and turned it. Then, as discreetly as a pump who has conveyed a customer to a water service, I inserted my own key in Slot B, turned it, and opened the drawer. It looked very vast now. The one remaining manuscript box seemed almost to quail in the far corner. Like in a named pump who said he knew his sibs have been taken off and gasped. *Prose* was scrawled across the top in fat black letters. I could barely remember what the goddam story was about.

I snatched that time traveler from the cigarettes and saw the safe-deposit box stat. Nothing left in there now but dust. *Give me that, it's my dust catcher*. It was the first time I thought it was that one in years.

Mr. Quinlan, I'm finished. I called My name, and he came and I was already in my own ears, but Quinlan seemed to see that I was not. Or perhaps I was just being direct, as if I were the only customer after all, who had his other visits to the street, and I was not Forest Lawn emotionally distressful.

I'm really going to read one of your books. I've read a few of

casual glance at the box I was holding (I suppose I could have brought a brief case to put it in, but on those expeditions I never did). In fact, I think I'll put it on my list of New Year's resolutions."

"You do that," I said. "You just do that, Mr. Quinlan."

"Mark," he said. "Please." He'd said this before, too.

I had composed two letters, which I slipped into the manuscript box before setting out for Federal Express. Both had been written on my computer, which my body would let me use as long as I chose the Note Pad function. It was only opening Word Six that caused the storms to start. I never tried to compose a novel using the Note Pad function, understanding that if I did, I'd likely lose that option, too—not to mention my ability to play Scrabble and do crosswords on the machine. I had tried a couple of times to compose a novel and, with spectacular lack of success. The problem wasn't what I had once heard described as "screen shyness"; I had proved that to myself.

One of the notes was to Harold, the other to Debra Winstock, and both said pretty much the same thing: here's the new book, *Holly's Progress*. I hope you like it as much as I do; it seems a little rougher, it's because I had to work a lot of extra hours to finish it this soon. Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. Erin Go Bragh, trick or treat, hope someone gives you a fucking pony.

I stood for almost an hour in a line of shuffling, bitter-eyed late mailers. Christmas is such a carefree, low-pressure time—that's one of the things I love about it—with *Holly's Progress* under my left arm and a pocket-size copy of Nelson DeMille's *The Chamberlain* in my right hand. I read almost fifty pages before entrusting my final, unpublished novel to a married-looking clerk. When I wished her a Merry Christmas she shuddered and said nothing.

CHAPTER

4

The phone was ringing when I walked in my front door. It was Frank Arlen, asking me if I'd like to join him for Christmas. Inasmuch as a matter of fact, all of his brothers and their families were coming.

I opened my mouth to say no—the last thing on earth I needed was a crazed Irish Christmas with everybody drinking whiskey and waxing sentimental about Joe while perhaps two or three snakes or rats crawled around the floor—and heard myself saying I'd come.

Frank sounded as surprised as I felt, but honestly delighted. "Fantastic!" he cried. "When can you get here?"

I was in the hall, my galoshes dripping on the tile, and when I started I was standing I could look through the arch and into the living room. There was no Christmas tree, I hadn't bothered with one since Joe died. The room looked both ghastly and much too big to me. The furniture was furnished in Early American.

"I've been out running errands," I said. "How about letting us have some underwear in a bag, get back into the car and come see the new heater's still blowing warm air?"

"Remind us," Frank said with, at a moment's hesitation, "What a

have as a sane teacher or evening before the Sons and Daughters of East March start arriving. I'm pouring you a drink as soon as I get off the telephone."

"Then I guess I better get rolling," I said.

That was hands down the best holiday since Johanna died. The only good holiday, I guess. For four days I was an honorary Arlen. I drank too much, to state. I. I. I. Anna's memory to many times — and knew, somehow, that she'd be pleased to know I was doing it. Two babies spit up on me, one dog got it into me, with me in the middle of the night, and Nicky, Arlen's sister-in-law, made a bleary pass at me on the night after Christmas, when she caught me alone in the kitchen making a turkey sandwich. I kissed her because she clearly wanted to be kissed — and an adventurous (or perhaps mischievous — is the word I want) and groped me for a moment in a place where no one other than myself had groped in almost three and a half years. It was a snack, but not an entirely unpleasant one.

It went no further — in a houseful of Arlens and with Sasy Donahue not quite officially divorced yet — like me, she was an honorary Arlen that Christmas, it hardly could have done — but I decided it was time to leave. — unless, that was, I wanted to go driving at high speed down a narrow street that most likely ended in a brick wall. I left on the twenty-seventh, very glad that I had come, and I gave Frank a fierce goodbye hug as we stood by my car. For four days I hadn't thought at all about how there was now only dust in my safe-deposit box at Fidelity Union and for four nights I had slept straight through until eight in the morning, sometimes waking up with a sour stomach and a hangover headache, but never once in the middle of the night with the thought *Mandela! I live! I am not dead!* It was going through my mind. I got back to Derry feeling refreshed and renewed.

The first day of 1998 dawned clear and cold and so I am beautiful. I get up, shower, then stand at the bedroom window drinking coffee. It suddenly occurred to me — with a little simple, powerful reality of rocks like a hammer over your head and down is under your feet — that I could write now. It was a new year, something had changed, and I could write now if I wanted to. The rock had rolled away.

BAG OF BONES

I went to the stadium and watched the game. At heart was not a footballer, was a soccer player and a lack of my neck and my arms were with the crowd. I mean the one you get when you look at the game. I had a World Six I'd kept in the pen, and I'd been in the and when it did, suddenly, I'd been in. It was as if I'd been clamped around my chest.

I pushed back from the desk, sagging in relief with the release of the sweatshirt I was wearing. The wheels of my chair rolled over a little throwing me one of Joshi's in the last seconds of the fall. I fell right over backward. My head banged the floor and a wave of pain coming from it sparked a whizzing, vibrating noise in my head. I saw stars, but I saw none to black out, but I think my recollection of New Year's Morning 1999 was that it tipped over the way I did. If I did not ask back then for Joshi's, I was still looking at the logo—and at the kids as a new team who in all would I think I might have missed to death.

When I staggered to my feet I was at least able to orient myself. I felt the size of a straw, and the rain made a deafening stream of sound, but I was breathing. I lurched into the bathroom and threw up my hair with such force that vomit splashed all over me. I groined out and my knees quaked. This time it was my brow I struck, knocking it against the tip of the basin, and although the back of my head did bleed, there was a very respectable lamp there, even though my forehead did, a little. This latter bump was left a purple mark, which I once displayed about telling folks who asked that I'd run in the rain, "I ran in the middle of the night, silly me, and I was out there up at two A.M. without turning on a lamp."

When I regained complete consciousness there's someone sitting at the foot of the bed. I got up, disoriented, I never realized what I was doing. I sat on the lip of the bed with my head lowered to my knees until I felt confident enough to stand up. I sat there for fifteen to twenty seconds and in that space of time I decided that anything was better than what was over. Hard we also scream in pain and Denny walked in, he was a doctor, but what could they do? So I said to the doctor, "I don't want to be threatened with them. Back off. My name is Gustav. I'm a doctor."

could what difference would it make? You couldn't get sap out of a stick or blood out of a stone. Barring some miraculous recovery, my life as a writer was over.

And . . . I asked myself: What's on for the back forty? Make 'em all play out. So, in the thirty years on a lot of Christmas Chrises, what a lot of jobs. But . . . I thought: What else are you going to put on your back forty?

I didn't want to think about that, not then. The next forty years could take care of themselves. I would be happy just to get through New Year's Day of 1998.

When I felt I had myself under control, I went back into my study, shuffled to the computer with my eyes resolutely on my feet, felt around for the right button, and turned off the machine. You can damage the program shutting down like that without putting it away, but under the circumstances, I hardly thought it mattered.

That night I once again dreamed I was walking at twilight on Lane Forty-two, which leads to Sara Laughs, once more I wished on the evening star as the loons cried on the lake, and once more I sensed something in the woods behind me edging ever closer. It seemed my Christmas holiday was over.

That was a hard cold winter, lots of snow and in February a flu epidemic that hid it and a awful lot of Derry sold folks. It took them the way a hard winter will take old trees after an ice storm. It missed me completely. I hadn't so much as a case of the sniffles that winter.

In March, I flew to Providence and took part in Will Wang's New England Crossword Challenge. I placed fourth and won fifty bucks. I treated the uncashed check and hung it in the living room. Once upon a time, most of my framed Certificates of Triumph (Jo's phrase; all the good phrases are Jo's phrases, it seems to me) went up on my office walls. But by March of 1998, I wasn't going in there very much. When I wanted to play Scrabble against the computer or do a tourney-level crossword puzzle, I used the PowerBook and sat at the kitchen table.

I remember sitting there one day, opening the PowerBook's main menu, going down to the crossword puzzles . . . then dropping the cur-

sort of two or three turns left or right. I thought, 'That's it. Yes. Six Six'.

What swept over me then was a frustration, a frustration I'd experienced a lot of but was too honest to admit. It wasn't just sadness, not simple longing for *King of the World* or for a second chance at looking at the pictures of Joe. I kept my eye on the screen, those, I sometimes think that I would sell my soul for the chance to have her back again. I'd offered to do so in March, the day I'd sold my soul to be able to write a story again.

Go to bed, go to bed, a voice whispered. All right, I thought.

Except that nothing had changed and I knew it. So I stood up, holding Word Six, I moved it across to the trash can in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, and dropped it in. *Crash.* I sat.

Debra Weinstein called a lot that winter. Most were good. In early March she reported that *Heart of Darkness* was a finalist of the Literary Guild's main selection for August. One of the judges being a legal thriller by Steve Martin. Another vote in the right direction. Fifteen segment of the *Doonesbury* list. Another British publisher. Debra said, loved *Heart*. Was sure it would do really, really well. (My British sales had always lagged.)

'*Prizzi* is sort of a new direction for you. Delusory. What do you say?'

'I kind of thought it was. I confess, an old word for a Debra would respond. I told her my new secret book had been written almost a dozen years ago.

'It's got . . . I don't know . . . a kind of *maturity*.'

'Thanks'

Maybe I think the connection's going. You said it yourself.

Sure I did. I was sitting down on the side of my hat to keep from yawning with laughter. Now, seriously I took out my notebook and examined the bite marks. 'Better.'

'Yes, lots. So what's the new one about? Give me a hint.'

'You know the answer to that one, kiddo.'

Debra laughed. 'You'll have to be a little more specific, I think,' she said. 'Right?'

"Yessum."

Well, keep it coming. Your pals at Putnam are crazy about the way you're taking it to the next level."

I said goodbye, I hung up the telephone, and then I laughed wildly for about ten minutes. I laughed until I was crying. That's me, though. Always taking it to the next level.

During this period I also agreed to do a phone interview with a *New York* writer who was putting together a piece on The New American Gothic (whatever that was, other than a phrase which might sell a few magazines), and to sit for a *Publisher's Weekly* interview which would appear just before publication of *Hearts Power*. I agreed to these because they not sounded softball, the sort of interviews you could do over the phone while you read your mail. And Debra was delighted because I ordinarily say no to all the publicity. I hate that part of the job and always have—especially the hell of the live TV chat show where nobody's ever read your goddam book and the first question is always "Where in the world do you get these wacky ideas?" The publicity process is like going to a sushi bar where you're the sushi, and it was great to get past it this time with the feeling that I'd been able to give Debra's some good news she could take to her bosses. Yes, she could say, he's still being a bougie about publicity, but I got him to do a couple of things."

All through this my dreams of Sara Laugas were going on—not every night, not every second, or third night, with me never thinking of them in the daytime. I did my crosswords, I bought myself an acoustic steel guitar and started learning how to play. It was never going to be invited to tour with Patty Loveless or Alan Jackson (however). I scanned each day's tabulated obituaries in the *Derry* for names that I knew. I was pretty much dozing on my feet, in other words.

What brought all this to an end was a call from Harold Oblowski not more than three days after Debra's book club call. It was storming outside—a vicious snow—hanging-over-to-sleet event that proved to be the last and biggest blast of the winter. By mid-evening the power would be off all over Derry, but when Harold called at five P.M. things were just getting cranked up.

BAG OF BONES

"I just had a very good conversation with her. It's great. A very enlightening, very interesting conversation. First, no phone, in fact."

"Oh?"

"Oh, heck. There's nothing at all there. Michael's return to back to his job may have a positive effect on our stock market. It's very strong."

"Yes," I said, "I'm taking it to the next level."

"Huh?"

"I'm just blabbing, Harold. Go on."

Well, Helen Nearing's a great little character and Skelton's my best villain ever."

I said nothing.

Debra raised the possibility of making *Heart of Power* the first of a three-book contract. A very *lethal* three-book contract. All without any prompting from me. Three is one more than any publisher has wanted to commit to, so now I mentioned nine million for the million per book, in other words, expecting her to laugh, but an agent has to start *somewhere* and I always choose the highest ground I can find. I think I must have Roman military officers somewhere back in my family tree."

Except in the most obvious moments. I thought about it and saw Heath way you do when the dentist has gone a little heavy on the Novocain and flooded your lips and tongue as well as your bad tooth and the piece of gum surrounding it. If I tried to talk I'd probably only spit and spread spit. Harold was a must, getting a three-book contract for the new, mature Michael Noonan. Tall tickets, baby.

This time I didn't feel like laughing. This time I felt so serious. Harold went on, happy and nervous. Harold didn't know the book-berry tree had died. Harold didn't know the new Mac Neely had lost his smug shortness of breath and I predicted he would die even if he tried to write.

"You want to hear how she came back to me, Michael?"

"Lay it on me."

She said, "Well, mine's a low, low, low, but it's a good one. It's a story

as it is. We feel this new book is a big step forward for him. This is extraordinary. *Extraordinary*. Now, I haven't given anything away, wanted to talk to you first, of course, but I think we're looking at seven point five, minimum. In fact—"

"No."

He paused a moment. Long enough for me to realize I was gripping the phone so hard it hurt my hand. I had to make a conscious effort to relax my grip. "Mike, if you'll just hear me out—"

"I don't need to hear you out. I don't want to talk about a new contract."

Patron me for disagreeing, but there'll never be a better time. Think about it for Christ's sake. We're talking top dollar here. If you wait until after *Heart of Promise* is published, I can't guarantee that the same offer—"

"I know you can't," I said. "I don't want guarantees, I don't want offers, *I don't want to talk contract*."

"You don't need to shout, Mike, I can hear you."

Had I been shouting? Yes, I suppose I had been.

Are you dissatisfied with Putnam? I think Debra would be very distressed to hear that. I also think Phyllis Grann would be damned near anything to address any concerns you might have."

I was *impatient* with Debra. *Harold*? I thought, and all at once it seemed like the most logical idea in the world—that dumpy, fiftyish, balding little Harold Oblowsky was making it with my blonde aristocratic Smith-educated editor. *Are you dissatisfied with her, do you talk about it with her?* I felt like I was going out the door of the Planet. *Are you going to tell her to fuck you, or are you going to tell her to get out of town and go to New York and tell her to fuck me, then if that fails, I shall try to tempt*—

"Harold, I can't talk about this now, and I don't talk about this now."

"What's wrong? Why are you so upset? I thought you'd be pleased. Hell, I thought you'd be over the fucking moon."

There's nothing wrong. It's just a bad time for me to talk long-term contract. You'll have to pardon me, Harold. I have something coming out of the oven."

"Can we at least discuss this next w—"

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wand was at the bottom and then when the revill comes I will be inside the storm risk to see the power of the lightning strike up and down up and down until when morning comes I will be at my wrist and pulls me like a lover deeper into the dark

I am three quarters of the way down the driveway and I am at the rear and the steps are long down to the door and I am at the rear there on the water a black square a black storm in the air BLD I have put it out I can also see in my eye something and in the ground the driveway ends at the step. There has never been a door before. What can it be?

Another two or three steps and I know I am at the rear and I am at the back of the door because I see the northern wind trying to strike me. It is too thin, and lying on its side with me to the partway open and I am me to see it's empty

I think I want to scream I think I mean to scream and I am at the back up the driveway I will take my chances with the door and I am at the back before I can the back door of Sara Laughs opens and I am at the back comes flaring out into the growing darkness. It is shaming and yet it is not. It is a crumpled white thing with the grey and is open. There is no face where it should be and I see it is shaming and yet it is not. It must be Joanna. She was at the back of the door but not her winding shroud. She is still engaged in it.

How hideously pale this creature is. It is not that it is not a pale as ghosts drifting but over across the street with the doorway it has been waiting down here during all the dreams when I had seen it and now that I have finally been able to walk down the stairs it has me. I'll scream when it wraps me in its skin and I will scream when I smell its rotting, bag riddle, flesh and sooty. I will scream when I see the fine weave of the cloth I will scream as the skin is torn and I will never I will scream but there is no one to hear me. Only the gods will hear me. I have no voice to M. D. V. and in this time I will never leave.

The snickling white thing reached for the door I woke up at the door my bedroom, crying out in a cracked horror. I was alone and I was

beat repeatedly against something. How long before I finally realized I was no longer asleep, that I wasn't at Sara Laughlin? How long before I realized that I had fallen out of bed at some point and had crawled across the room in my sleep, that I was on my hands and knees in a corner, banging my head against the place where the walls came together, banging it over and over again like a lunatic in an asylum?

I didn't know, couldn't with the power out and the bedside clock dead. I knew that at first I couldn't move out of the corner because it felt safer than the wider room would have done, and I know that for a long time the dream's force held me even after I woke up (mostly, I imagine, because I couldn't turn on a light and dispel its power). I was afraid that if I crawled out of my corner, the white thing would burst out of my bathroom, shrieking its dead shriek, eager to finish what it had started. I know I was shivering all over and that I was cold and wet from the waist down, because my bladder had let go.

I stayed there in the corner, gasping and wet, staring into the darkness, wondering if you could have a nightmare powerful enough in its imagery to drive you insane. I thought then (and think now) that I almost found out on that night in March.

Finally I felt bold to leave the corner. Halfway across the floor I pulled off my wet pajama pants, and when I did that, I got disoriented. What followed was a miserable and surreal five minutes in which I crawled aimlessly back and forth in my familiar bedroom, bumping into stuff and moaning each time I hit something with a blind, flailing hand. Each thing I touched at first seemed like that awful white thing. Nothing I touched felt like anything I knew. With the reassuring green numerals of the bedside clock gone and my sense of direction temporarily lost, I could have been crawling around a mosque in Addis Ababa.

At last I ran shoulder first into the bed. I stood up, yanked the pillowcase off the extra pillow, and wiped my groin and upper legs with it. Then I crawled back into bed, pulled the blankets up, and lay there shivering, listening to the steady tick of sleep on the windows.

There was no sleep for me the rest of that night, and the dream didn't fade as dreams usually do upon waking. I lay on my side, the shivers slowly subsiding, thinking of her coffin there in the driveway tank.

CHAPTER

5

Once when I was sixteen, a plane went supersonic directly over my head. I was walking in the woods when it happened, thinking of some story I was going to write, perhaps, or how great it would be if Darren Farnier weakened some Friday night and let me take off her pants while we were parked at the end of Cushman Road.

In any case I was traveling far roads in my own mind, and when that boom went off, I was caught totally by surprise. I went flat on the leafy ground with my hands over my head and my heart drumming crazily sure I'd reached the end of my life (and while I was still a virgin). In my forty years, that was the only thing which recalled the final dream of the "Manderley series" for utter terror.

I lay on the ground waiting for the hammer to fall, and when thirty seconds or so passed and no hammer *at all*, I began to realize it had just been some jet-jockey from the Brunswick Naval Air Station, too eager to wait until he was out over the Atlantic before going to Mach 1. But, hey, shit, who ever could have guessed that it would be *so cool*?

I got slowly to my feet and, as I stood there with my heart finally slowing down, I realized I wasn't the only thing that had been scared.

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wildsway that stalked our skyloom. For the first time in years, even the little patch of woods behind our house in Plover's Neck was silent. I stood there in a dazed sort of stupor, not that I was shocked by me, the shirt and tie was holding my breath, standing I felt even hear a silence like it. Even on a cold day in January the woods would have been full of conversation.

At last a Finch sang. There were two or three seconds of silence, followed by a jay reply. Another two or three seconds went by and then a crow added his two cents worth. A woodpecker came in to see what the groos. A chipmunk jumped through some underbrush nearby. A minute after I had stood up, the woods were teeming again with life. And again, it was back to business as usual and I continued with mine. I never forgot that unexpected boom, though, or the deadly silence which followed it.

I thought of that Jane day often in the wake of the nightmare, and there was nothing so remarkable in that. Things had changed, some over or *under* change — but first comes silence when we assure ourselves that we are still unafraid and that the danger — of there *is* a danger — is gone.

Derry was shut down for most of the following week, my wife and I. High winds caused a great deal of damage during the storm, and I saw a ten twenty degree plunge in the temperature afterwards. The boys were going at hard and the cleanup slow. Added to that the extra sympathy for a March storm is always dear and pessimistic, we get room up this was every year (and two or three in April for good measure) — we were not lucky, but we never seem to expect it. Every time we get hit, it's not we take it personally.

On a day toward the end of that week, the weather finally started to break. I took advantage, going out for a cup of coffee and for morning poetry at the little restaurant three doors down from the Red. And where Johann and her list errand. I was sitting and I was working the newspaper crossword when someone asked, "Could I share your booth, Mr. Noonan? It's pretty crowded, where I'd."

I looked up and saw an old man that I knew, it was Jim Eppes from Ralph Roberts, he said. "I volunteer to work at the Red Cross. May I sit my wife, Lois?"

"Oh, okay, sure," I said. I give blood at the Red Cross every six weeks or so. Ralph Roberts was one of the old parties who passed out juice and cookies afterward, telling you not to get up or make any sudden movements if you felt woozy. "Please, sit down."

He looked at my paper, folioed open to the crossword and lying in a patch of sun, as he sat into the booth. "Don't you find that doing the crossword in the *Derry News* is sort of like striking out the pitcher in a baseball game?" he asked.

I laughed and nodded. "I do it for the same reason folks climb Mount Everest. Mr. Roberts . . . because it's there. Only with the *News* crossword, no one ever falls off."

"Call me Ralph. Please."

"Okay. And I'm Mike."

"Good." He grinned, revealing teeth that were crooked and a little yellow, but all his own. "I like getting to the first names. It's like being able to take off your tie. Was quite a little cap of wind we had, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "but it's warming up nicely now. The thermometer had made one of its name March leaps, climbing from twenty-five degrees the night before to thirty that morning. Better than the rise in air temperature, the sun was warm again on your face. It was that warmth that had coaxed me out of the house."

"Spring is gettin' here, I guess. Some years it gets a little lost, but it always seems to find its way back home." He sipped his coffee, then set the cup down. "Haven't seen you at the Red Cross lately."

"I'm recovering," I said, but that was a fib. I'd come eligible to give another pint two weeks ago. The reminder card was up on the refrigerator. It had just slipped my mind. Next week, for sure.

"I only mention it because I know you're an A, and we can always use that."

"Save me a couch."

"Count on it. Everything going all right? I can ask because you look tired. If it's insomnia, I can sympathize, believe me."

He *did* have the look of an insomniac, I thought—too wide around the eyes, some how. But he was also a man in his mid- to late seventies, at which I don't think anyone gets that far without showing it. Stick around

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[illegible]

I opened my mouth to say what I was so—when someone said, "You're all right," then wondered why I was left. I was in a room with Marlboro Man shirt, just when I was trying to be. What would happen if I let the guy who gave me a needle stick me down at the Red Cross after the nurse took the needle out of me? I wasn't feeling a hundred percent Earthquake. For an hour, I was

No, I said, I really haven't seen too many great 'Raj' 'Flu' It's been going around."

Nana: The flu missed me this time, it turns out. And I've been sleeping a lot right. Which was true—there had been no recurrence of the Seta laughs dream, neither the normal or the night-scar version. 'I know, I've just got the blues.'

Well, you ought to take a vacation, he said, then spoke no more. When he looked up at me again, he frowned and set a sceptical frown. 'What? Is something wrong?'

N I thought of saying: *Yes, even that I, too, am a Jew, like you, Ralph, that I all.*

No, nothing wrong, I said, and then because sort of wanting to see how the words tasted coming out of my own mouth, repeated them: "A vacation."

"Ayuh," he said, smiling. "People do it all the time."

People do call on time. He was right about that: even people who usually strictly adhered to went on vacation. When the next time I was coming, I was hailed up in the townshut. When it was time to start the work, I was getting and spending.

I could certainly afford a vacation, and I took seven or ten days off from work — just work, nothing else — but I needed the Red Cross to be able to point out what should have been seen as a decent, educated gay like me, that I hadn't been on an extended vacation since I had gone to Bermuda, the way it looked she — let M. put her down — she was no longer turning, but I had kept my nose to the ground.

It wasn't until that summer, when I read Ralph Roberts's eulogy in the *New York Times* (he was struck by a car), that I fully realized how much I owed him. That advice was better than any glass of orange juice I ever got after giving blood, let me tell you.

When I left the restaurant, I didn't go home but tramped over half of the damn town—the section of newspaper with the partly completed crossword puzzle—it clamped under one arm. I walked until I was chilled in spite of the warming temperatures. I didn't think about anything, and yet I thought about everything. It was a special kind of thinking, the sort I do always done when I was getting close to writing a book, and although I hadn't thought that way in years, I let it out easily and naturally, as if I had never been away.

It's like some guys with a dog track have pulled up in your driveway and are moving things into your basement. I can't explain it any better than that. You can't see what these things are because they're all wrapped up in padded quilts, but you don't need to see them. It's funny, rare, everything you need to make your house a home, make it just right, just the way you wanted it.

When the guys have hopped back onto their truck and driven away, you go down to the basement and walk around—the way I went walking up to Derry that late morning, slipping up and down the dale in my cut-glass shoes, touching a paddle I serve here, a padded angle there. Is this one a sofa? Is that one a dresser? It doesn't matter. Everything is here; the movers didn't forget a thing, and although you'll have to get it all upstairs—yourself straining your poor old back in the process, more often than not, it hurts okay. The important thing is that the delivery was complete.

This time I thought—hoped—the delivery truck had brought the stuff I needed for the book farm—the years I might have to spend in a No Writing Zone. Tell me what do if they had come, and they had knocked perfectly and when, after several minutes there was still no answer, they had finally fetched a battering ram. *WELL, THEY DIDN'T. THE NIGHT DIDN'T SCARE YOU TOO BAD. SORRY ABOUT THE DOOR!*

I didn't care about the door. I cared about the furniture. Any pieces

painting her toenails—bent over between her own thighs in the way only women doing that particular piece of business can manage. I thought of her throwing a look at me because I laughed at some new ha ha that I thought of her trying to learn how to play a breakdown on her banjo and of how she looked braless in a thin sweater. I thought of her crying and aching and angry. I thought of her telling me it was crap, all that frustrated-artist crap.

And I thought about the dreams—especially the culminating dream. I could do that easily, because it never tasted as the more ordinary ones do. The final Sara Laughs dream and my very best wet dream (coming upon a girl lying naked in a hammock and eating a plum) are the only two that remain perfectly clear to me, year after year—the rest are either hazy fragments or completely forgotten.

There were a great many clear details to the Sara dreams—the lions, the crickets, the evening star and my wish upon it, just to name a few—but I thought most of those things were just verisimilitude. Scene-setting, if you will. As such, they could be dismissed from my considerations. That left three major elements, three large pieces of furniture to be unwrapped.

As I sat on the beach, watching the sun go down between my sandy toes, I didn't think you had to be a shrink to see how those three things went together.

In the Sara dreams, the major elements were the woods behind me, the house below me, and Michael Noonan himself, frozen in the middle. It's getting dark and there's danger in the woods. It will be frightening to go to the house below, perhaps because it's been empty so long, but I never doubt I must go there—scary or not, it's the only shelter I have. Except I can't do it, I can't move, I've got writer's walk.

In the nightmare I am finally able to go toward shelter, only the shelter proves false. Proves more dangerous than I had ever expected in my well-yes, in my wildest dreams. My dead wife rushes out, screaming and still tangled in her shroud, to attack me. Even five weeks later and almost three thousand miles from Derry, remembering that speedy white thing with its baggy arms would make me shiver and look back over my shoulder.

But what about Johanna? I didn't really know, did I? The thing was al-

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wrapped up. The coffin looked like the one I saw in the woods, buried, true, but that might just be misdirection.

Writer's walk, writer's block

I can't write. I told the voice in the dream I was scared. I said I was afraid the writer's block is gone and I believe that because the writer's block is gone I'm finally needed down here. I say go on, go on, I say I'm afraid, though. Even before the sabotage with the geologists, I was afraid. I'm terrified. I say it's Mrs. Donnelly I'm afraid of, but this is just my dreaming mind getting Sara Laughs and Monday all mixed up. I'm afraid of

I'm afraid of writing. I heard myself saying that over the intercom even try."

This was the night before I finally flew back to Maui, and I was barely past sober, going on drunk. By the end of my vacation I was drinking a lot of evenings. It's not the block that scares me, it's not *the block*. I'm really fucked by boys and girls. I'm fucked by getting me

Fucked or not, I had an idea I'd finally resolved the matter of the matter. I was afraid of undoing the block, maybe afraid of picking up the strands of my life and going on with it. Yet some deep part of me would believe I must do it, that's what the menacing noises down in the woods were about. And belief counts for a lot. Too much, maybe, especially if you're imaginative. When an imaginative person gets into mental trouble, the line between seeing and being is a wobbly, slippery one.

Things in the woods, yes, sir. I had a lot of them right there in my hand as I was thinking these things. I lifted my drink. I found it was like the western sky so that the setting sun seemed to be burning in the glass. I was drinking a lot, and maybe that was a kick on Key Luge. The hell, people were supposed to drink a lot on vacation, it was almost the law. But I'd been drinking too much even before I left. The kind of drinking that could get out of hand in no time at all. The kind that could get a man in trouble.

Things in the woods, and the potentially safe place that was the scary bugbear that was not my wife, but perhaps my wife's dream that made sense because Sara Laughs had always been just a name in the earth. That thought, I felt, another one that made the swampy woods

over the side of the chaise I'd been reclining on and sit up in excitement. Sara Laugh's had also been the place where the ritual had began—champagne, last line, and the all-important benediction. *Well, then, that's all right, isn't it?*

Did I want things to be all right again? Did I truly want that? A month or a year before I mightn't have been sure, but now I was. The answer was yes. I wanted to move on—let go of my dead wife, renab my heart, move on. But to do that, I'd have to go back.

Back to the log house. Back to Sara Laugh's.

Yeah. I said, and my body broke out in gooseflesh. "Yeah, you got it. So why not?"

The question made me feel as stupid as Ralph Roberts's observation that I needed a vacation. If I needed to go back to Sara Laugh's now that my vacation was over, indeed, why not? It might be a little scary the first night or two—a hangover from my final dream—but just being there might dissolve the dream faster.

And (this last thought I allowed in only one humble corner of my conscious mind, something *might* happen with my writing. It wasn't likely—but it wasn't impossible, either. *Burnt, a miracle* hadn't taken my thought on New Year's Day as I sat on the rim of the tub, holding a damp washcloth to the cut on my forehead? Yes. *Burnt, a miracle*. Sometimes blind people fall down, knock their heads, and regain their sight. Sometimes maybe cripples are able to throw their crutches away when they get to the top of the church steps.

I had eight or nine months before Harold and Debra started really nagging me for the next novel. I decided to spend the time at Sara Laugh's. It would take me a little while to tie things up in Derry, and while for Bud Dean to get the house on the lake ready for a year-round resident—but I could be down there by the Fourth of July, easily. I decided that was a good date to shoot for, not just the birthday of our country but pretty much the end of bug season in western Maine.

By the day I packed up my vacation gear (the John D. MacDonald paperbacks I left for the cabin's next inhabitant), shaved a week's worth of stubble off a face so tanned it no longer looked like my own to me, and flew back to Maine. I was decided. I'd go back to the place my saboteur

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some small traditional fish-lashts (for sea trout, salmon, and eels) and a
back-eyed roughgony and had a few small sea trout that I had caught
by without risks, I would not go back, so I did not stay there. I was
I was far away from the lake and when I saw the evening star, I
out over the lake and the first time I was far away from the lake.

One of the things that didn't fit into my academic instruction of the 1980s was dreams, and because I couldn't explain it, I tried to ignore it. I never have much use, though, part of me was still a writer. I guess I guess there is a man who has taught his mind to push away.

It was the car in the back of my head. That's not how you tell the dreams, I would swear I had it—and then it had a real purpose. You didn't get that sort of shit in the works at Dr. Freud, so it like that was strictly for the Psychic Friends hotline.

I had no moment that and I thought as my plane started to descend I was in seat A-2 (one nice thing about flying up front is that if the sky goes down, you're first to the crash site) and looking at pine forests as we slipped along the glidepath toward Chiang International Airport. This was my last year, I had a vacation to the death to go to the mountains many times but you don't go much any more. I've been a tourist always out front aren't they? Well, then they're dead. Put me down, please.

... All that should have rung true and yet some how it didn't ... it *should* have, but ... well ...

It was the boys in the basement. They were the ones who didn't buy it. The boys in the basement didn't buy it at all.

At that point there was a thump as the box touched the floor and I kept the whole line of thought out of my mind.

One afternoon shortly after arriving back in our room at Hotel Sals, until I found the shoeboxes containing David's photographs. I sorted them, then studied my way through the ones of Dark Side. There were a staggering number of these, but because I had a weak stomach, there were none in my wallet or in my handbag. I found it strange that I remembered taking in 1990 or '91.

Sometimes even an untrained photographer can risk a few dollars.

ture. It seven hundred monkeys spent seven hundred years bashing away at seven hundred typewriters, and all that—and this was good. In it Jo was standing on the beach with the sun going down red gold behind her. She was just out of the water, dripping wet, wearing a two-piece swimming suit, gray with red piping. I had caught her laughing and pressing her soaked hair back from her forehead and temples. Her nipples were very prominent against the cups of her halter. She looked like an actress on a movie poster for one of those guilty pleasure B pictures about monsters at Party Beach or a serial killer stalking the campus.

I was sucker punched by a sudden powerful lust for her. I wanted her upstairs just as she was in that photograph, with strands of her hair pasted to her cheeks and that wet bathing suit clinging to her. I wanted to suck her nipples through the halter top, taste the cloth and feel their hardness through it. I wanted to suck water out of the cotton like milk, then yank the bottom of her suit off and fuck her until we both exploded.

Hands shaking a little, I put the photograph aside, with some others I liked (although there were no others I liked in quite that same way). I had a huge hard-on, one of those ones that feel like stone covered with skin. Get one of those and until it goes away you are good for nothing.

The quickest way to solve a problem like that when there's no woman around willing to help you solve it is to masturbate, but that time the idea never even crossed my mind. Instead I walked restlessly through the upstairs rooms of my house with my fists opening and closing, and what looked like a good name it stuff I down the front of my jeans.

Anger may be a normal stage of the grieving process. I've read that it is—but I was never angry at Jeannine in the wake of her death until the day I found that picture. Then, wow. There I was, walking around with a bitch that just wouldn't quit. / *How* with her. Stop! Bitch, why had she been running on one of the hottest days of the year? Stupid, inconsiderate bitch to leave me alone like this, not even able to work.

I sit down on the stairs and wonder what I should do. A drink was what I should do. I decided, and then maybe another drink to scratch the first one's itch. I actually got it up before deciding that wasn't a very good idea at all.

I went into my office instead, turned on the computer, and did a

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crossword puzzle. That is, it will never be solved by a computer at the present state of the art, but it is solvable in principle, as hard as the *n*-word problem, which is known to be undecidable. But if $\langle \sigma_1, \sigma_2, \sigma_3, \sigma_4, \sigma_5, \sigma_6, \sigma_7, \sigma_8, \sigma_9, \sigma_{10} \rangle$ is the dream for sure.

[illegible]

A week's thought made the idea of it a sensible one. It was a better plan than ever. So on a Saturday afternoon nearly 100 years ago, I wrote that my self-respecting Maine cat ever would be a member of the Red Sox. I called him "Denny" in the *Portland Evening Star* on the Fourth of July, 1901, and that's the way it was. I was spending the fall and winter there as well.

"Well, it's good," he said. "It's real good now. Alvin talks down here, missed you. Mike. Quit a few that want to talk to you about your wife, don't you know?"

Was there the faintest note of reproach in his voice or a slight, self-mocking imagination? Certainly Jo and I had cast a shadow in the area we had made significant contributions to the local library when serving at Morton, Kashwakamuk, Castle V, Wareau, and I had done the successful fund drive to get an archival bookmobile up and running. I had been to that, we had been, artfully, as sewing circle. It is a nice irony, really, and a member in good standing of the Castle County Crafts Coop. Visits to the store—helping out with the bookmobile after the department book drive—two manning the checkout of Soda at the Castle Rock—and stuff like that was not where she had started. She didn't do it in any stentorian way, but she would come out cheerfully and humbly with her head lowered, often to the ground, her sharp smile. I should add, my Jo had a Brierley sense of humor. Christ, I thought in quick disbelief, but not out of proportion.

* People miss her," I said.

'Ayuh, they do'

I still miss her and myself. I think that's why I still have a room the lake. That's where a lot of our good times were.

I s p r o v e s t h a t B u t t e r f i e l d c o n m p r e h e n s i b l y s u s t a i n s t h e t r a d i t i o n a l

get busy. The place is all right — you could move into it this afternoon, if you was a mind — but when a house has stood empty the way Sara was, it gets stale."

"I know."

"I'd get Brenda Mesterve to clean the whole shebang from top to bottom. Same gal you always had, don't you know?"

Brenda's a little old for comprehensive spring cleaning, isn't she? The lady in question was about sixty-five, stout-kind, and cheerfully vulgar. She was especially fond of jokes about the travelling salesman who spent the night like a rabbit — jumping from hole to hole. No Mrs. Danvers she.

Ladies like Brenda Mesterve never get too old to oversee the festivities. But so will she. I'll get two or three girls to do the vacuuming and heavy lifting. Set you back maybe three hundred dollars. Sound all right?"

"Like a bargain."

The wall needs to be tested and the gennies too, although I'm sure both of 'em's okay. I seen a hornet's nest by Joe's old studio that I want to stake before the woods get dry. Oh, and the roof of the old house — you know, the mad-as-a-horse place — needs to be reshingled. I shoulda talked to you about it that last year, but with you not using the place, I let her slide. You stand good for that, too?"

"Yes, up to ten grand. Beyond that, call me."

"If we have to go over ten, I'll smile and kiss a pig."

Try to have it all done before I get down there, okay?"

Cass: Yeah, want your privacy. I know that — just so long's you know you won't get any right away. We was shocked when she went so young, & I et us were. Shackles and saw. She was a dear. From a Yankee mouth, that word rhymes with *Leath*.

Thank you, Bill. I feel tears prickle my eyes. Great as a drunken houseguest, always coming back for one more goodbye hug. Thanks for saying."

"You'll get your share of carrot cakes, chammy." He laughed, but a little toothily, as if afraid he was committing an impropriety.

I'll eat a lot of carrot cake, I said, and it talks over to it, well, just 't Kenny Auster still got that big Irish wolfhound?"

Bill had filled out the roll with various views of the house, most conveying that subtle air of neglect a place gets when it's not used enough—even a place that's caretook (to use Bill's word) gets that neglected feel after awhile.

I barely glanced at these. The first four were the ones I wanted, and I hunched in on the kitchen table, where the strong sunlight would fall directly on them. Bill had taken these from the top of the driveway, pointing the disposable camera down at the sprawl of Sara Laughs. I could see the moss which had grown not only on the legs of the main house, but on the eaves of the north and south wings, as well. I could see the tatter of fallen branches and the drifts of pine needles on the driveway. Bill must have been tempted to clear all that away before taking his snaps, but he hadn't. I'd told him exactly what I wanted—warts and all—was the phrase I had used—and Bill had given it to me.

The bushes on either side of the driveway had thickened a lot since Jo and I had spent any significant amount of time at the lake; they hadn't exactly run wild, but yes, some of the longer branches did seem to yearn toward each other across the asphalt like separated lovers.

Yet what my eye came back to again and again was the stoop at the foot of the driveway. The other resemblances between the photographs and my dreams of Sara Laughs might only be coincidental (or the writer's often surprisingly practical imagination at work), but I could explain the snailworts growing out through the boards of the stoop no more than I had been able to explain the cat on the back of my hand.

I turned one of the photos over. On the back, in a spidery script, Bill had written: *Inspect on rear of house at dusk.*

I flipped back to the picture side. Three sunflowers growing up through the boards of the stoop. Not two, not four, but three large sunflowers with faces like searchlights.

Just like the ones in my dream.

CHAPTER

6

On July 3rd of 1995, I threw two suitcases and my PowerBook in the trunk of my mid-sized Chevrolet, started it back down the drive way, then stopped and went into the house again. It felt extremely uncomfortable like a ritual over which I had been dropped and I cannot understand why. The furniture wasn't covered and the power was still on. I am not sure that The Great Lake Experiment might turn out to be a system, a total failure, but on Benton Street it described all the same. It was the faint furniture to exhaust I did when I walked through them and everywhere there seemed to be too much dusty light.

In my study, the VDT was headed like an executioner against the dust. I knew before it was opened, and the desk, now is. In seven or four reams of paper I took one started why with it under my feet. I had a second thought and turned back. I had said that it was a creative project. In her swivel, at the wide center drawer. Now I took it off the paper wrapping, to the end of the ream of paper, and said the paper had two in one bookmark. If I opened one page, it wrote down and at the writing machine, I would not. I had a right and a page two hundred and fifty.

I left the house, locked the back door, got into my car, and drove away. I have never been back.

I'd been tempted to go down to the lake and check out the work—which turned out to be quite a bit more extensive than Bill Dean had originally expected—on several occasions. What kept me away was a feeling, never quite articulated by my conscious mind, but still very powerful, that I wasn't supposed to do it that way, that when I next came to Sara, it should be to unpack and stay.

Bill hired out Kenny Auster to shingle the roof, and got Kenny's cousin, Timmy Larabee, to "scrape the old girl down," a cleansing process akin to pot-scrubbing that is sometimes employed with log houses. Bill also had a plumber in to check out the pipes—and got my okay to replace some of the floor plumbing and the well pump.

Bill russed about all these expenses over the telephone. I let him. When it comes to fifth- or sixth-generation Yankees and the expenditure of money, you might as well just stand back and let them get it out of their systems. Laying out the green just seems wrong to a Yankee somehow like petting in public. As for myself, I didn't mind the outgo a bit. I live frugally, for the most part, not out of a moral code but because my imagination—very lively in most other respects—doesn't work very well on the subject of money. My idea of a spree is three days in Boston, a Red Sox game, a trip to Tower Records and Video, plus a visit to the Wordsworth bookstore in Cambridge. Lying like that doesn't make much of a dent in the interest, let alone the principal. I had a good money man get down in Waterville, and on the day I looked the door of the Derry house and headed west to TR 90, I was worth slightly over five million dollars. Not much compared to Bill Gates, but big numbers for this area, and I could afford to be careful about the high cost of house repairs.

That was a strange late spring and early summer for me. What I did mostly was wait, close up my town affairs, talk to Bill Dean when he called with the latest round of problems, and try not to think. I did the *Playboy* "Watch" interview, and when the interviewer asked me if I'd had any trouble getting back to work "in the wake of my bereavement," I

though I were some new and oozy specimen of bug. I didn't like it much, but I suppose I understood it.

I had been close to what is these days called 'a relationship' on two occasions, neither of them on Key Largo, where I had observed roughly two thousand pretty women walking around dressed in only a stitch and a promise. Once it had been a red-haired waitress, Kelli, at a restaurant out on the Extension where I often had lunch. After awhile we got talking, joking around, and then there started to be some of that eye contact you know the kind I'm talking about: looks that go on just a little too long. I started to notice her legs, and the way her uniform pulled against her hip when she turned, and she noticed me noticing.

And there was a woman at Na Yu, the place where I used to work out. A tall woman who favored pink jog bras and black bike shorts. Quite yummy. Also, I liked the stuff she brought to read while she pedaled one of the stationary bikes on those endless aerobic trips to nowhere—not *Made with Milk* or *Come*, but novels by people like John Irving or Helen Cushman. I like people who read actual books, and not just because I once wrote them myself. Book readers are just as willing as anyone else to start out with the weather, but as a general rule they can actually go on from there.

The name of the woman in the pink tops and black shorts was Adria Bundy. We started talking about books as we pedalled side by side everywhere to nowhere, and there came a point where I was spotting her one or two mornings a week in the weight room. There's something really intimate about spotting. The prone position of the lifter is part of it. I suppose (especially when the lifter is a woman), but not a lot even most of it. Mostly it's the dependence factor. Although it hardly ever comes to that point, the lifter is trusting the spotter with his or her life. And at some point in the winter of 1996, those looks started as she lay on the bench and I stood over her, looking into her upside-down face. The ones that go on just a little too long.

Kelli was around thirty. Adria, perhaps a little younger. Kelli was divorced. Adria never married. In neither case would I have been robbing the cradle, and I think either would have been happy to go to bed with me on a provisional basis: kind of a honey bump test-drive. Yet what I

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day in Kev's case was when I asked him to tell me what he thought about the Y.M.C.A. sent me after my arrest. He said that the cops and the cops' wife were making a New York Times out of it. And that Bureau was at the street next to his house, that he'd been changed, and that he'd said that I had some eyes, some eyes with a slightly hurt gaze.

in a purely physical way. I wanted to make a connection with the
 remembrance of a dream in which I had been both in the same place at the
 same time, and yet I wanted neither. Part of it was to make a
 writer's life was or to tucked up enough to thank you with an
 any amount of complications. Part of it was the work involved in making
 sure that the woman who is returning your glances is not just a
 you and not your rather extravagant bank account.

Most of it, I think, was that there was just too much just in my head and heart. There was no room for anything else, even after 10 years. It was sorrow, like cholesterol, was it? or this, that's time, or weird, be grateful.

What about friends? Frank asked, at last beginning to let his strawberry shortcake. You've got to, only a slice of my life.

Yes, I said. Plenty of friends. When I was a child, I have friends for swords to do lots of books to read and lots of boxes to put in my VCR at night, I could practically recite the FBI's regulations on unlawful copying by heart. When it came to real live people, however, I ceded when I got ready to leave Derry were not just that a scientist and most of the man I sent out that June consisted of business address cards to magazines like *Harper's* and *National Geographic*.

"Frank," I said, "you sound like a Jewish mother."

Sometimes when I row with you I feel like a Jewish mother. You are One who believes in the curative powers of baked goods (not just matzo balls). You look better than you have in a long time. For you, it seems, some weight, I think.

'Too much.'

Buller's oriole like behavior. One was very close to Christmas. Also, you've got some sun on your face and arms."

"I've been walking a lot."

"So you look better . . . except for your eyes. Sometimes you get this look in your eyes, and I worry about you every time I see it. I think I would be glad *someone's* worrying."

"What look is that?" I asked.

"Your basic thousand-yard stare. Want the truth? You look like someone who's caught on something and can't get loose."

I left Derry at three-thirty, stopped in Rumford for supper, then drove slowly in through the rising hills of western Maine as the sun lowered. I had planned my times of departure and arrival carefully, if not quite consciously, and as I passed out of Motton and into the unincorporated township of TR 90, I became aware of the heavy way my heart was beating. There was sweat on my face and arms in spite of the car's air conditioning. Nothing on the radio sounded right, all the music like screaming, and I turned it off.

I was scared, and had good reason to be. Even setting aside the peculiar cross-pollination between the dreams and things in the real world (as I was able to do quite easily, dismissing the cat on my hand and the sunflowers growing through the boards of the back stoop as either coincident or so much a psychic matter I had reason to be scared). Because they *didn't* seem ordinary dreams, and my decision to go back to the lake after a lifetime hadn't been an ordinary decision. I didn't feel like a modern *finest of the lot* man on a spiritual quest to face his fears (I'm okay, you're okay, let's all have an emotional circle jerk while William Ackerman plays softly in the background). I felt more like some crazy Old Testament prophet going out into the desert to live on lumps and alkali water because God had summoned him in a dream.

I was in trouble, my life was a moderate going-on-severe mess, and not being able to write was only part of it. I wasn't rapping kids or running around Times Square preaching conspiracy theories through a bullhorn, but I was in trouble, just the same. I had lost my place in things and couldn't find it again. No surprise there, after all. It's not a book. What I was engaging in on that hot July evening was self-induced shock therapy, and gave me at least this much credit. I knew it.

You come to Dark Score this way: 1995 from Derry to Newport

FAC OF BONES

Road 2 from Newport to Beldenville is a gravel road that is in
 strike southward and until the gravel is covered with a
 great deal of dead grass and ferns. Road 2 from Beldenville
 to Waterford then takes Route 68 to the County Line where
 View through Mott where I was on a road which
 which is a view been the scene of a road which
 which leads to the road which is a view of a road
 IN THE NEW YORK (SOUTH) CAMPAIGN
 this is a gray paint scene in a road which

Five more just that sign you have to add to the 22 marked by a sign are of the with the 11 in the 22. This, like umlauts, are a couple of 22 holes.

I turned into this lane just about when I had seen the first trees.
* * * * *
I got an EDF by the clock on the Chevrolet's day meter.

And the feeling was coming home.

I drove in two rentals at a mile by the hour. I seemed to be in a class where I owned the lane which I ran against the other cars. I was listening to the occasional branch which was tapped or scratched or knocked on the passenger side like a fist.

At last I parked and turned the engine off. I got out, walked to the rear of the car, lay down on my belly and began to feel around for what touched the Chevy's hot exhaust system. It had been a very hot summer and it was best to take precautions. I had to make it as exact as I could in order to replicate my dreams, hoping for some future scientist to do the work for an idea of what to do next. What I had not counted on was starting a forest fire.

Once this was done I stood up and looked at the checkers on the board as they had in my dreams, and the trees I had dreamed of were there in the distance, as they always did in my dreams. Over the trees was a thin, long strip of blue.

I set off walking up the ridge now we were to find. I had a good netgunner at this end of the ridge and Mrs. Washburn, her two sons, driveway was overgrown with lupine bushes and a few other plants. I walked up the ridge. Noted to write a note about the ridge's structure.

PASSAGE. Nailed to one on the right was NEXT COUNTRY REAL ESTATE, and a cedar shingle. The words were faded and hard to read in the growing gloom.

I walked on, once more conscious of my heavily beating heart and of the way the mosquitoes were buzzing around my face and arms. Their peak season was past, but I was sweating a lot, and that's a smell they like. It must remind them of blood.

Just how scared was I as I approached Sara Laugh's? I don't remember. I suspect that fright-like pain, is one of those things that slip our minds once they have passed. What I *do* remember is a feeling I'd had before when I was down here, especially when I was walking this road by myself. It was a sense that reality was thin. I think it is thin, you know, thin as lake ice after a thaw, and we fill our lives with noise and light and motion to hide that thinness from ourselves. But, a place like Lake Berry two, you find that all the smoke and mirrors have been removed. What's left is the sound of crickets and the sight of green leaves darkening toward black, branches that make shapes like faces, the sick note of your heart in your chest, the beat of the blood against the backs of your eyes, and the look of the sky as the day's blue blood runs out of its cheek.

What comes in when daylight leaves is a kind of certainty—that beneath the skin there is a secret, some mystery both black and bright. You feel this mystery in every breath, you see it in every shadow, you expect to plunge into it at every turn of a step. It is here, you slip across it on a kind of breathless curve like a skater turning to home.

I stopped for a moment about half a mile south of where I left the car and still half a mile north of the driveway. Here the road curves sharply, and on the right is an open field which slants steeply down toward the lake. It well's Meadow is what the locals call it, or sometimes the Old Camp. It was here that Sara Tidwell and her curious tribe built their cabins, at least according to Marge Hingerman (and once, when I asked, Bill Dean, he agreed this was the place—although he didn't seem interested in continuing the conversation, which struck me at the time as a bit odd).

I stood there for a moment, looking down at the north end of Dark

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Secret. The water was grassy and brown, still more or less the color of a
glow of sunset without its hues. Pops of fish shot out and back in.
The boat people walked all the way down the shore next to the water.
Sunset. But by now I guessed that the water only had a few of the
mixed drinks. Later, a few of them, buzzed for speed, were jumping
up and down the lake by moonlight. I wondered if I could hear
around to hear them. I thought there was a chance that I could
be on my way back to Derry, either terrified or what I thought was
illusioned because I had found nothing at all.

"You funny little man, said Strickland."

I didn't know I was going to speak until the words were out of my
mouth, and why those words in particular I had no idea. I remember
my dream of Joe under the bed and shuddered. A noise to wake
in my ear. I slapped it and walked on.

In the end, my arrival at the head of the driveway was a most perfectly
timed, the sense of having re-entered my dream almost too com-
plete. Even the allusions tied to the S-B-A-C-I-I design and white neon
blue, both with *SECRET* and *SECRET* carefully printed in them in black
ink, and floating against the ever-darkening cackles of the trees
seemed to intensify the déjà vu I had quite deliberately tried to forget.
Two dreams are exactly the same, are they? Things conceived in minds
and made by hands can never be quite the same even when they try
their best to be identical, because we're never the same from year to year
or even moment to moment.

I walked to the sign, feeling the mystery of this place, it was like a
squeezed down in the brain, feeling its rough reality. I ran the
back of my thumb over the letters during the seconds, not really knowing
my skin like a blind man reading braille. And I said A and B and C and D
and U and G and H and S.

The driveway had been cleared of all the new trees and small
branches, but Dark Secret gardeners and dingy rose test as if they were
dreams, and the sprawl of hulk of the house was the same. A
thoughtfully left the light over the back steps of the house, the
flowers growing through the boards, the long, long, long, long, long, long,
everything else was the same.

I looked overhead at the slit of sky over the lane. Nothing. I waited—and nothing—waiting still—and then there it was, right where the center of my gaze had been trained. At one moment there was only the fading sky (with indigo just starting to rise up from the edges like an infusion of ink), and at the next Venus was glowing there—bright and steady. People talk about watching the stars come out, and I suppose some people do, but I think that was the only time in my life that I actually saw one appear. I wished on it, too, but this time it was real time, and I did not wish for Jo.

Help me. I said, looking at the star. I would have said more, but I couldn't know what to say. I didn't know what kind of help I needed.

Then, at last, a voice in my mind said anxiously: That's enough, now. Go on back and get your car.

Except that wasn't the plan. The plan was to go down the driveway, just as I had in the final dream—the nightmare. The plan was to prove to myself that there was no shadow-wrapped monster lurking in the shadows of the big old log house down there. The plan was pretty much based on that bit of New Age wisdom which says the word "fear" stands for Face Everything And Recover. But, as I stood there and looked down at that spark of perch light (it looked very small in the growing darkness), it occurred to me that there's another bit of wisdom, one not quite so widespread—morning-starshine—which suggests fear is actually an acronym for Fuck Everything And Run. Standing there by myself in the woods as the light left the sky, that seemed like the smarter interpretation: no two ways about it.

I looked down and was a little amused to see that I had taken one of the balloons—uncared it was at even noticing as I thought things over. It floated serenely up from my hand at the end of its string, the words printed on it now impossible to read in the growing dark.

The next morning, standing alone in a field, I wrote: "My plan did not work. I am a little old for this. I must be a statue until someone comes along and hauls me away."

But this was real time in the real world, and in the real world there was no such thing as writer's walk. I opened my hand. As the string I'd

been nothing there. I began walking and let the noise take over. I fell down the driveway. I got to the bottom pretty fast, as the car had since I'd first started this truck back in 1979. I went as far as I could into the clean, clear air, smeared with pine, and once I had my eyes closed, an extra big step, avoiding a fallen branch that I'd been in the branch. I wasn't here in reality.

My heart was still thudding hard, and sweat was still pouring out of me, stinging my skin and drawing new waters. I raised my hand to my forehead, then stopped, nodding it solemnly, red-out in front of my eyes. I put the other one next to it. Neither was marked; there wasn't even a shadow of a scar from the cut I'd given myself while crawling around my bedroom during the ice storm.

"I'm all right," I said. "I'm all right."

You got a little more said to the man, a voice answered. It wasn't mine, wasn't Joe's, it was the UFO voice that had narrated my nightmare, the one which had driven me on even when I wanted to stop. The voice of some outsider.

I started walking again. I was better than halfway down the driveway now. I had reached the point where, in the dream, I'd felt the voice that I was afraid of Mrs. Danvers.

I'm afraid of Mrs. D., I said, trying the words aloud in the growing dark. What if the bad old housekeeper's down there?

A door creaked in the dark, but the voice didn't answer. I supposed it didn't have to. There *was* no Mrs. Danvers; she was only a bag of bones in an old book, and the voice knew it.

I began walking again. I passed the big pine tree that had once leaned into my Jeep, trying to back up the driveway. It was dead and swayed like a skeleton. I had managed to keep a straight line, but it was getting back a creak, and then I'd lost it, leaning against the side of the Jeep with my heels of my hands pressed against my temples, howling until tears rolled down my cheeks, and I'd glaring hot blue sparks at me in the dark.

I could see the mark, about three feet up on the trunk of the tree, the white, seeming to float above the dark bark in the growing dark, was somewhere that the breeze, which pervaded the entire directionless sky, I felt something far worse. Even before the shadow, though I'd been in the dark.

out of the house. I had felt something was all wrong, all twisted up. I had felt that somehow the house itself had gone insane. It was at this point, passing the old scarred pine, that I had wanted to run like the gingerbread man.

I didn't feel that now. I was afraid, yes, but not in terror. There was nothing behind me, for one thing, no sound of slobbering breath. The worst thing a man was likely to come upon in these woods was an irritated moose. Or, I supposed, if he was really unlucky, a pissed-off bear.

In the dream there had been a moon at least three quarters full, but there was no moon in the sky above me that night. Nor would there be, my glancing over the weather page in that morning's *Daily News*. I had noticed that the moon was new.

Even the most powerful *deja vu* is fragile, and at the thought of that moonless sky, mine broke. The sensation of reliving my nightmare departed so abruptly that I even wondered why I had done this, what I had hoped to prove or accomplish. Now I'd have to go all the way back down the dark lane to retrieve my car.

Alright, but I'd do it with a flashlight from the house. One of them would surely still be just inside the—

A series of jagged explosions ran themselves off on the far side of the lake, the last loud enough to echo against the hills. I stopped, drawing in a quick breath. Moments before, those unexpected bangs probably would have sent me running back up the driveway in a panic, but now I had only that brief startled moment. It was firecrackers, of course, the last one—the loudest one—maybe an M80. Tomorrow was the Fourth of July, and across the lake kids were celebrating early, as kids are wont to do.

I walked on. The bushes still reached like hands, but they had been pruned back and their reach wasn't very threatening. I didn't have to worry about the power being out, either. I was now close enough to the barn to stop to see moths fluttering around the light. Bill Dean would turn on for me. Even if the power had been out on the western part of the state at that time, lines are still above ground, and it goes out a lot, the genie would have kicked in automatically.

Yet I was awed by how much of my dream was actually here, even with the powerful sense of repetition—of *reliving*—departed. Jos

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planters were where they'd always been, the kitchen was the same as ever. Sara's little book about the apes was behind the door. The jars of jam were stacked in the corner and the last of the corn was in the cupboard. No time was growing in there, at least not the time that I was in. And even when the morning fog cleared, I still found the old landscape of the water standing as at first, as if it were a swimming float.

No odd, long shape lying over the rock in front of the screen door, no yellow coffin. Still, my heart was beating hard again, and I took a few more crackers and got into the Kuswaka oak side of the house, where I might have screamed.

You funny little man, said Strickland.

Give me that, it's my dust-catcher.

What if death makes us insane? What if we survive, but it makes us insane? What then?

I had reached the point where, in my nightmare, the door would open and that white shape came hurtling out with its wrap around as pressed. I took one more step and then stopped, hearing the harsh sound of my respiration as I drew each breath down my throat and then pushed it back out over the dry floor of my tongue. There was no sense of a void, but for a moment I thought the shape would appear any second now, in the real world, in real time. I stood waiting for it with my sweat-soaked hands clenched. I drew in an extra dry breath and held it a full minute.

The soft lap of water against the shore

A breeze that patted my face and rattled the bushes

A loon cried out on the lake, norths rattled the steeping light

No shroud master threw open the door and there in the void was a white cat and right off the door I could see nothing of what was what, or otherwise. There was a note above the kind of proper, thin, B that was it. I let out my breath in a rush and walked the rest of the way down the driveway to Sara Laughs.

The note was indeed from Bill Deen. It said that Brenda was on her shopping for me, the supermarket receipt was on the kitchen table and I would find the poultry well stacked with other goods. She'd gone

easy with the per seables but there was milk, butter, half-and-half, and hamburger, that staple of single-guy cuisine.

I will see you next week. Bill has written by hand my answers to me but I say and repeat to you that the good people say if I do turn to do the boundary setting, then I will do it as best I can, but I will not do it for you. I will do it for you if you need anything or run into problems . . .

He also listed his sister-in-law's phone number in Virginia as well as Betty Wiggins's number in town, which locals just call the TR, as in

Me and mother got tired of Bethel and move our trailer over to the TR. There were other neighbors, as well—the plumber & electrician, Brenda Meserve, even the TV guy over in Harrison who had repositioned the DDS dash for maximum reception. Bill was taking no chances. I turned the note over, announcing a final PS: *Say Mike, if whoever had done this job before me had Yacht got it better, together.*

Something moved behind me.

I whirled in my heels, the note dropping from my hand. It fluttered to the boards of the back stoop like a larger, whiter version of the maths banging the bus overhead. In that instant I was sure it would be the shrouded thing, the one reverent in my wife's decaying body. *Give me my seat, I will give it to you. You do not have to take that seat because it is not yours. I will give it to you. And you must know that you're not a ruler or even a judge. In ten years you will be a ruler and a judge. I will give it to you.*

Nothing there. It had just been the breeze again, stirring the bushes around a little. . . . except I had felt no breeze against my sweaty skin, not that time.

"Well it must have been, there's nothing there," I said

The sound of your voice when you're alone can be either scary or reassuring. That time it was the latter. I bent over, picked up Bill's note, and stuffed it into my back pocket. Then I rummaged out my keyring. I stood under the stoop, right in the big, swooping shadows of the light-struck moths, picking through my keys until I found the one I wanted. It had a funny, coiled look, and as I rubbed my thumb along its serrated edge, I wondered again why I hadn't come down here—except for a couple quick bread-day-gate errands—in all the months and years since Jo had died. Surely if she had, ten alive, she would have insisted.

RAG OF RONES

But then, my more realistic interpretation of the weather was that it was a *front*. It was so, so I think that's what it was. I was in the south for six weeks on my large and I thought that was a long time. I was actually standing here, the shadows of the clouds, I must have been standing there's the wind on the hills. I was standing there, I was at the lake. I remember that although I was not in the south August 1974, I was there in Derry, Ireland, I was not there. Why? Why had we been there? Why had we been there? I was at a shady deck on the lake, I was on the lake, I was on the lake, I was bathing, I was watching the boats go back and forth and I was on the lake, I was on the various water sports. What I was not doing was that damned Rate Air, parsing lot to get a few with which we could have August we would have been miles from there?

Not was that all. We usually stayed at Sara until the end of September. It was a peaceful, pretty time, as warm as summer but not too hot. Her dad, August, only a week gone. I knew because I had a room at her home, going to New York with me later that month, some kind of proslavery, and the usual, it meant publicity crap. It had never done her a damn bit in the hydrants spraying in the East Village and the uptown streets zig-zag. On one night of that trip we'd seen *Life* magazine, *Oscar*. Near the end I had leaned over to me and whispered, "Attack! The Prophet is snoring again!" I had spent the rest of the sleep trying to see if it was just snoring into my peaceful haze after Joseph. I knew that was

Why has she on new time that August? I could take New York on in April or October, when it's sort of pretty. I don't know, I don't remember. All I was sure of was that it was the best time to go. So, I go in the early August of 1958. I don't know for sure, but I think it's of that.

I slipped the key into the lock and turned it. I don't know if I was in the kitchen yet, or if I was grabbing the light and going to turn on the light, but some drunk guy with a strange attitude showed up. He told me to get out of his apartment and get behind my Chevy and I started crying. He told me to

The highest value of the probability density function is still smaller than the value of the probability density function

the light inside the door, and then, somewhere in the blackness of the house, a child began to sob. My hand froze where it was and my flesh went cold. I didn't panic exactly, but all rational thought left my mind. It was weeping, a child's weeping, but I hadn't a clue as to where it was coming from.

Then it began to fade. Not to grow softer but to *fade*, as if someone had picked it back up and was carrying it away down some long corridor—not that any such corridor existed in Sara Laugh's. Even the one running through the middle of the house, connecting the central section to the two wings, isn't really long.

Fading . . . faded . . . almost gone.

I stood in the dark with my cold skin crawling and my hand on the light switch. Part of me wanted to boogie, to just go flying out of there as fast as my little legs could carry me, running like the gingerbread man. Another part, however—the rational part—was already reasserting itself.

I flicked the switch, the part that wanted to run saying forget it—it won't work, it's the dream, stupid—it's your dream coming true. But it *did* work. The foyer light came on in a slow, dizzying rash, revealing Jo's lumpy little pottery collection to the left and the bookcase to the right—stuff I hadn't looked at in four years or more, but still here and still the same. On a middle shelf of the bookcase I could see the three early Elmore Leonard novels—*Shog*, *The Big Bounce*, and *Mr. Alice*—that I had put aside against a spell of rainy weather: you have to be ready for rain when you're at camp. Without a good book, even two days of rain in the woods can be enough to drive you bonkers.

There was a final whisper of weeping, then silence. In it, I could hear ticking from the kitchen. The clock by the stove, one of Jo's rare lipsets that I had fostered. It's the Cat with big eyes that shift from side to side as his pendulum caltacks back and forth. I think it's been in every cheap horror movie ever made.

"Who's here?" I called. I took a step toward the kitchen—just a dim space floating beyond the foyer, then stopped. In the dark the house was a cavern. The sound of the weeping could have come from anywhere. Including my own imagination. "Is someone here?"

BAG OF BONES

No answer — but I got the message soon enough. I knew I had been, writer's block was the least of my worries.

Struggling on the desk over the first rough draft, I was in a long, parched dash, getting the snail-like words of the Deafened Deaf potently and vividly — someone's sure to tell me that's exactly what it is until it nearly slipped off the pen, my hand too stiff to continue how heavy I was sweating, or how sore I was. I pushed the pen, pushing hard — not expecting that creepy sucking to occur, and not expecting the shredding to come floating out of the hole in the room with its shapeless areas raised, stark and black, the pen in my hand in the grave and ready to give it all that was left. A red string, a correction ticker, brethren, and you will be saved.

I got control of the light and turned it on. It shot a bright stream of beam into the living room, looking out the moonbeams over the left stone fireplace. It came in the headspace, as eyes, but no lights. I saw, under water, I saw the old cane and bamboo chairs, the blue and red scarred dining room table, a year had to be late by a month or so, with a folded playing card or a couple of beer canisters. I saw the ghosts. I decided this was a seriously facked up carnival, just the same. In the words of the immortal Cole Porter, let's all the whole thing off. It needed cast as soon as I got back to my car. I could be in Derry by midnight. Sleeping in my own bed.

I turned out the fever light and stood with the flash-drawn curtains back across the dark. I listened to the tick of that stupid, old clock, or a bell, must have set going, and to the faint, far, jagged voices of the refrigerator. As I listened to them, I realized that I had never expected to hear either sound again. As for the crying . . .

Had there *been* crying? Had there really?

Yes. Crying or *distress*. Just what it was, I knew. But Wren's end, germane was that coming here had been a catalyst, a shock, and a step of course, of a front for a man who has taught his mind to be secret. As I stood in the foyer with no light, but the distant light of a window, with windows from the outside over the dark street, I realized that the line between what I knew was real and what I knew was not — a distinction had pretty much disappeared.

I left the house, checked to make sure the door was locked, and walked back up the driveway, swinging the flashlight beam from side to side like a pendulum—like the tail of old Felix the Krazy Kat in the kitchen. It occurred to me, as I struck north along the lane, that I would have to make up some sort of story for Bill Dean. It wouldn't do to say, "Well, Bill, I got down there and heard a kid bawling in my locked house—and it scared me so bad I turned into the gingerbread man and ran back to Derry. I'd send you the flashlight I took, put it back on the shelf next to the paperbacks, would you?" That wasn't any good because the story would get around and people would say, "Not surprised. Wrote too many books, probably. Work like that has got to switch a man's head. Now he's scared of his own shadow. Occupational hazard."

Even if I never came down here again in my life, I didn't want to leave people on the TR with that opinion of me, that half-contemptuous, see-what-you-get-for-thinking-too-much attitude. It's one a lot of folks seem to have about people who live by their imaginations.

I'd tell Bill I got sick. In a way it was true. Or no—better to tell him someone *else* got sick—a friend—someone in Derry I'd been seeing—a lady friend, perhaps. Bill, this friend of mine, this *lady* friend of mine got sick, you see, and so.

I stopped suddenly, the light shining on the front of my car. I had walked the mile in the dark without noticing many of the sounds in the woods, and dismissing even the bigger of them as deer settling down for the night. I hadn't turned around to see if the shroud thing (or maybe some spectral crying child) was following me. I had gotten involved in making up a story and then embellishing it, doing it in my head instead of on paper this time but going down all the same well-known paths. I had gotten so involved that I had neglected to be afraid. My heartbeat was back to normal, the sweat was drying on my skin, and the mosquitoes had stopped whining in my ears. And as I stood there, a thought occurred to me. It was as if my mind had been waiting patiently for me to calm down enough so it could remind me of some essential fact.

The tapes Bill had gotten my go-ahead to replace most of the old stuff—and the slumber had done so. Very recently he'd done so.

"Are the pipes? Is it? I can't tell," I asked, and I stepped over the grille of my Chevrolet. "That's what I heard."

I wanted to see if it was part of my run-around, but I stopped for a long while. I didn't—because I supposed I was hearing it. Any pipes cars and like people talking, it was strange and different. Perhaps the parallel I had drawn was the same but was something else—but perhaps I hadn't. The question was whether or not I was going to jump in my car, back two feet as if a collector had been and then return it. Derry was on the bass of a sound I had heard—there was maybe only five, and while I am excited I stressed, starting again.

I decided the answer was no. It might take only one more thing to turn me around—probably grabbing like a chair, or a *chair*, but the sound I had heard in the car wasn't enough. Not when my king a good it at Sara Laughs might mean something.

I hear voices in my head, and have for as long as I can remember. I don't know if that's part of the necessary equipment for being a writer or not. I've never asked another one. I never felt the need to—because I know all the voices I hear are versions of me. Still, they often seem like very real versions of other people, and none is more real to me—more familiar—than Joe's voice. Now that voice came sounding, interested, amused in an ironic but gentle way—and a pretty way.

Going to fight, Mike?

"Yeah," I said, standing there in the dark and, picking out pieces of chrome with my flashlight. "Think so, babe."

Well, then—that's all right, isn't it?

Yes. It was. I got into my car, started it up, and drove slowly down the lane. And when I got to the driveway, I turned in.

There was no crying the second time I entered the house. I walked slowly through the downstairs, keeping the flashlight on the floor and I had turned on every light I could find, and there were people still sitting on the north end of the lake—let Sara probably look down at me, with a Spideyergon flying saucer hovering above her.

I think I miss live their own lives along a time, street, but I suffer from the ones up in which their own is their own—that's slower. It's

hours, especially an old one, the past is closer. In my life Jonanna had been dead nearly four years, but to Sara, she was much nearer than that. It wasn't until I was actually inside, with all the lights on and the flash returned to its spot on the bookshelf, that I realized how much I had been dreading my arrival. Of having my grief reawakened by signs of Jonanna's interrupted life. A sock with a corner turned down on the table at one end of the sofa where Jo had liked to recline in her nightgown reading and eating plums; the cardboard canister of Quaker Oats, which was all she ever wanted for breakfast, on a shelf in the pantry; her old green robe hung on the back of the bathroom door in the south wing, which Bill Dean still called "the new wing," although it had been built before we ever saw Sara Laughs.

Brenda Meserve had done a good job—a humane job—of removing these signs and signals, but she couldn't get them all. Jo's hardcover set of Savers's Peter Winsey novels still held pride of place at the center of the living-room bookcase. Jo had always called the moosehead over the fireplace Banter, and once, for no reason I could remember (certainly it seemed a very un-Banterlike accessory), she had hung a belt around the moose's hairy neck. It hung there still, on a red velvet ribbon. Mrs. Meserve might have puzzled over that belt, wondering whether to leave it up or take it down, not knowing that when Jo and I made love on the living-room couch (and yes, we were often overcome there, we referred to the act as "ringing Banter's bell"), Brenda Meserve had done her best, but any good marriage is secret territory, a necessary white space on society's map. What others don't know about it is what makes it yours.

I walked around, touching things, looking at things, seeing them new. Jo seemed everywhere to me, and after a little while I dropped into one of the old cane chairs in front of the TV. The cushion wheezed under me, and I could hear Jo saying, "Well excuse yourself, Michael."

I put my face in my hands and cried. I suppose it was the last of my mourning, but that made it no easier to bear. I cried until I thought something inside me would break. I didn't stop. When it finally let me go, my face was drenched, I had the hiccups, and I thought I had never felt so tired in my life. I felt strained all over my body—partly from the walking I'd done, I suppose, but mostly just from the tension of getting

here—and sleep again, still here. To sleep, I thought, was the only way I'd escape when I first stepped into the prison. But that escape, so distant now, hadn't helped.

I washed my face at the sink, rinsed out my hair, and rubbed my cheeks and my hands and everything else dry. I pulled out the nightgown I'd worn down to the guest bedroom on the night I was told I was going to be sleeping in the south wing, in the master bedroom where I had once slept with Jo.

That was a choice Brenda Meserve had to see. I'd brought a bouquet of fresh wildflowers in the bouquet and a small vase from the kitchen at Norman. If I hadn't been emotionally exhausted, I suppose I could have taken that message in Mrs. Meserve's spiky, copper-colored hair, but I wouldn't have brought on another fit of the weeps. I put my face to the pillows and breathed deeply. They smelled good, like seaweed. Then I took off my clothes, leaving them where they'd dropped, and turned back to the crib on the bed. Fresh sheets, fresh pillows, as soft as I'd never found in the former and I'mopping fish house in the attic.

I lay there with the bedside lamp on, looking up at the shadows in the ceiling, almost unable to believe I was in this place and this bed. There had been no shroud lying to greet me at dusk, and I had no idea it might well find me in my dreams.

Sometimes—for me, at least—there's a transition and sleep between waking and sleeping. Not that night. I'd fallen away without knowing it, and woke the next morning with sunlight streaming in through the window and the bedside lamp still on. There had been no dream, not that I could remember, only a vague sensation that I had been somewhere, abruptly in the night and heard a bell ringing in my ear, that I was

CHAPTER

7

The little girl—actually she wasn't much more than a baby—came walking up the middle of Route 68, dressed in a red bathing suit, yellow plastic flip-flops, and a Boston Red Sox baseball cap turned around backward. I had just driven past the Lakeview General Store and Dickie Brooks's All-Purpose Garage, and the speed limit there drops from fifty-five to thirty-five. Thank God I was obeying it that day, otherwise I might have killed her.

It was my first day back. I'd gotten up late and spent most of the morning walking in the woods which run along the lakeshore, seeing what was the same and what had changed. The water looked a little lower and there were fewer boats than I would have expected, especially on summer's big test-and-day, but otherwise I might never have been away. I even seemed to be slapping at the same bugs.

Around eleven my stomach alerted me to the fact that I'd skipped breakfast. I decided a trip to the Village Cafe was in order. The restaurant at Warrington's was trendier by far, but I'd be stared at there. The Village Cafe would be better—if it was still doing business. Buddy Johnson was an old-tempered tack, but he had always been the best fry cook

generation, we can't touch a child who isn't our own without fearing others will see something lecherous in our touching—or without thinking, way down deep in the sewers of our psyches, that there probably is something lecherous in it. I got her out of the road, though I did that much. Let the Marching Mothers of Western Maine come after me and do their worst.

"You take me beach?" the little girl asked. She was bright-eyed, smiling. I figured that she'd probably be pregnant by the time she was twelve—especially given the cool way she was wearing her baseball cap. "Got your suitie?"

"Actually I think I left my suitie at home. Don't you hate that? Honey, where's your mom?"

As if in direct answer to my question, the car I'd heard came busting out of a road on the near side of the curve. It was a Jeep Scout with mud slashed high up on both sides. The motor was growling like something up a tree and pissed off about it. A woman's head was poked out the side window. Little cat's mom must have been too scared to sit down; she was driving in a mad crouch, and if a car *had* been coming around that particular curve in Route 68 when she pulled out, my friend in the red bathing suit would likely have become an orphan on the spot.

The Scout fishtailed, the head dropped back down inside the cab, and there was a grinding as the driver apshitted, trying to take her old heap from zero to sixty in maybe nine seconds. If pure terror could have done the job, I'm sure she would have succeeded.

"That's Mattie," the girl in the bathing suit said. "I'm mad at her. I'm running away to have a Fourth at the beach. If she's mad I go to my white nana."

I hadn't realized what she was talking about, but it *did* cross my mind that Miss Boxer of 1975 could have her Fourth at the beach. I would sacrifice a fifth of something whole grain at home. Meanwhile, I was waving the arm out under the kid's butt back and forth over my head, and hard enough to blow around wisps of the girl's fine blonde hair.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Hey, lady! I got her!"

The Scout sped by, still accelerating and still sounding pissed off at about it. The exhaust was blowing clouds of blue smoke. There was a

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hurdler who is grinning from the seats, still wearing the same crazy version of *I Luv My D*. "I Luv My D" says, "I'm getting into second gear. Would you like to see the Truck or the Washer, or do you want to try for third?"

I had the only thing I could think of, which was to speed up and turn, turn toward the Jeep which was now screaming at me to smile for the . . . I was truck and a tire . . . and I did it, I kept my head, hoping Mattie would see it, I felt like a clown with my arms out like Chester the Molester. Now I felt like a cruel and mean and a Disney cartoon, offering the latest I piglet in the later to rack and roll later. It worked, though. The Scouts made one thought, after a while there was a demonic howling as the baby used brakes, like . . . kept it out of Brookside's, this was. If there were any other members of a group of friends or lady gossip, they would now have plenty of gossip about I thought they would especially enjoy the part where Mattie screamed at me to unhound her baby. When you return to your summer home after a long absence, it's always nice to get off on the right foot.

The backup lights flared and the Jeep began reversing down the road at a good twenty miles an hour. Now the transmission suddenly stopped, it was saying please stop, please stop, please stop. The Scout's rear end wagged from side to side, like a tail on a dog. I watched it coming at me, by the road, now it was in my lane, now across the white line and into the southbound lane, now correcting so that the left-hand tires spumed dust at the shoulder.

Mattie go fast. My new girlfriend said in a conversation about this interesting vehicle. She had the arm slung around my neck, over my chums, by God.

But what the kid said woke me up. Mattie go fast. All right, I said. Mattie would, more likely than not, see me out of the front of my Chevrolet. And if I just stood there, Baby Snooks and I were apt to end up as toothpaste between the two vehicles.

I backed the length of my car keeping my eyes fixed on the Jeep, and yelling, "Slow down, Mattie! Slow down!"

Cutie-pie liked that. "S'yo down!" she yelled, starting to laugh. "S'yo down, you old Mattie, s'yo down!"

The brakes screamed in fresh agony. The Jeep took one last walloping, unhappy jerk backward as Mattie stopped without benefit of the clutch. That final lunge took the Scout's rear bumper so close to the rear bumper of my Chevy that you could have bridged the gap with a cigarette. The smell of oil in the air was huge and furry. The kid was waving a hand in front of her face and coughing theatrically.

The driver's door flew open. Mattie Devore flew out like a circus acrobat shot from a cannon, if you can imagine a circus acrobat dressed in old paisley shorts and a cotton smock top. My first thought was that the little girl's big sister had been babysitting her, that Mattie and Mummy were two different people. I knew that little kids often spend a period of their development calling their parents by their first names, but this pale-cheeked blonde girl looked all of twelve, fourteen at the outside. I decided her mad handling of the Scout hadn't been terror for her child, or not *just* terror, but total automotive inexperience.

There was something else, too, okay? Another assumption that I made: The muddy four-wheel-drive, the baggy paisley shorts, the smock that all but screamed Kmart, the long yellow hair held back with those little red elastics, and most of all the inattention that allows the three-year-old in your care to go wandering off in the first place—all those things said trailer trash to me. I know how that sounds, but I had some basis for it. Also, I'm Irish, goddammit. My ancestors were trailer-trash when the trailers were still horse-drawn caravans.

"*Stinky pants!*" the little girl said, still waving a pudgy hand at the air in front of her face. "Scoutie *stink!*"

Weren't Scouties *needing* *softer*? I thought, and then my new girlfriend was snatched out of my arms. Now that she was closer, my idea that Mattie was the Catholic beauty's sister took a hit. Mattie wouldn't be middle-aged until well into the next century, but she wasn't twelve or fourteen, either. I now guessed twenty, maybe a year younger. When she snatched the baby away, I saw the wedding ring on her left hand. I also saw the dark circles under her eyes, gray skin dusting to purple. She was young, but I thought it was a mother's terror and exhaustion I was looking at.

I expected her to swat the tar because that's how trailer-trash moms react to being tired and scared. When she did, I would stop her—*one way*

or another—a strict but not stifling discipline. The first was a punishment. There was nothing very terrible about it, but I wanted to do was to post myself in every hallway, street, store, and in your back, shouting to a bunch of people—whom I was not even watching. It was my first day back in town. I don't want to spend my time watching an inattentive slut abuse her child.

Instead of scolding her and scolding. "Where do you think you're going, you little bitch?" Mattie first hugged the child (who hugged back enthusiastically, showing absolutely no sign of recognizing her mother) and then kissed her face with kisses.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. "What was my reward?" "When I couldn't find you, I died."

Mattie burst into tears. The child, in the bathing suit, looked at her with an expression of surprise, sitting and completely motionless. Unusually comical, under other circumstances. Then her own face crumpled, and she stood back, watching them crying and hugging, and her preconceptions of her preconceptions.

A car went by and slowed down. An older couple—Ma and Pa Ketter—on their way to the store for that holiday book of *Green Nuts*—gawked out. I gave them an impatient wave with both hands, the kind that says what are you staring at?—then, put an egg in each side of an egg at. They sped up, but I didn't see an egg of state. I'm sure that as I adopted I might. This version of Ma and Pa were always, and the story would be fleeting its roundness in an eager Mattie the teenager, her little bundle of joy (and found a mother, a young girl in a school seat of a car, or the bed of a pickup truck, some of it, some of it, a legitimizing ceremony), hawking their eyes at it, the sick of it, the day. With a stranger. Not, not exactly a stranger. Milk. Not, not a stranger, from upstate.

I wanted to go to the beach and look at the little girl, and now it was swim that sounded exciting. The Viceroy was waiting "ecstasy," perhaps.

I said I'd take you this afternoon. Mattie was still sitting, her legs ring herself in her control. "Don't do that again," she said, "because I'll do you ever do that again, Mommy was so scared."

I won't," the kid said. "I really won't." Still crying, she nugged the older girl tight, laying her head against the side of Mattie's neck. Her baseball cap fell off. I picked it up, beginning to feel very much like an outsider here. I poked the blue and red cap at Mattie's hand until her fingers closed on it.

I decided I also felt pretty good about the way things had turned out, and maybe I had a right to. I've presented the incident as if it was amusing—and it was, but it was the sort of amusing you never see until later. When it was happening, it was terrifying. Suppose there had been a truck coming from the other direction? Coming around that curve, and coming too fast?

A vehicle *had* come around, and it—a pickup of the type no tourist ever drives. Two more locals gawked their way by.

"Ma'am," I said. "Mattie? I think I'd better get going. Glad your little girl is all right." The minute it was out, I felt an almost irresistible urge to laugh. I could picture me drawing this speech to Mattie (a name that belonged in a movie like *The Unforgotten* or *True Grit* if any name ever did) with my thumbs hooked into the belt of my chaps and my Steco'n pushed back to reveal my nookie brow. I felt an insane urge to add, "You're right pretty, ma'am, ain't ya, the new schoolmarm?"

She turned to me and I saw that she *was* right pretty. Even with circles under her eyes and her blonde hair sticking off in gears to either side of her head. And I thought she was doing okay for a girl, probably not yet old enough to buy a drink in a bar. At least she hadn't soiled the baby.

"Thank you so much," she said. "Was she right on the road? Say she wasn't, her eyes pegged. At least say she was walking along the shoulder." "Well—"

I walked on the line—the girl said, pointing. "It's like the cross-mock." Her voice took on a faintly righteous tone. "Cross-mock is safe."

Mattie's cheeks, already white, turned whiter. I didn't like seeing her that way, and didn't like to think of her driving home that way, especially with a kid.

"Where do you live, Mrs.—?"

Devore, she said. Tim Mattie Devore. She shifted the child and put out her hand. I shook it. The morning was warm, and it was going

ner, she was most extraordinarily pretty. Put her in a tennis dress at the Castle Rock Country Club (where she'd likely never go in her life—except maybe as a maid or a waitress), and she would maybe be more than pretty. A young Grace Kelly, perhaps.

Then she looked back at me, her eyes very wide and grave.

"Mr Noonan, I'm not a bad mother," she said.

I felt a start at my name coming from her mouth, but it was only momentary. She was the right age, after all, and my books were probably better for her than spending her afternoons in front of *General Hospital* and *One Life to Live*. A little, anyway.

We had an argument about when we were going to the beach. I wanted to hang out the clothes, have lunch, and go this afternoon. Kyra wanted—' She broke off. "What? What did I say?"

Her name is Kyra? Did—? Before I could say anything else, the most extraordinary thing happened: my mouth was full of water. So full I felt a moment's panic, like someone who is swimming in the ocean and swallows a wave-wash. Only this wasn't a salt taste, it was cold and fresh, with a faint metal tang like blood.

I turned my head as I spilled spit. I expected a gush of liquid to pour out of my mouth—the sort of gush you sometimes get when commencing artificial respiration on a near-drowning victim. What came out instead was what usually comes out when you spit on a hot day: a little white pellet. And that sensation was gone even before the little white pellet struck the dirt of the shoulder. In an instant, as if it had never been there.

"That man spitted," the girl said matter-of-factly.

Sorry. I see. I was also bewildered. What in God's name had *that* been about? "I guess I had a little delayed reaction."

Mattie looked concerned, as though I were eighty instead of forty. I thought that maybe to a girl her age, forty is eighty. "Do you want to come up to the house? I'll give you a glass of water."

"No, I'm fine now."

All right, Mr Noonan. All I mean is that nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I was hanging sheets—she was inside watching *Ally McBeal*—on the VCR—then, when I went in to get

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more pins. She looked at the girl who was nailing her hair, and
starting to get through to her box. Her voice came out in a whisper
with tears. She was gone. I thought for a moment I had lost her.

Now the known path began to crumble and the rest of the path
 on Karmala. Skilled to wheel Matt's stick and to use a small
 small head until it lay against the Kmart smock top.

That's what K. said. It turns out, though, that it's a car stuck in the mud. It's dangerous. Don't go near it. It's a real bad car. It's a thing. The most dangerous thing in the world.

Spent red hiker. It was the excitement and thrill of the unknown, a nap before any more adventures, to the beach or anywhere else.

Kia died. Kia died, she sobbed against her mother's neck.

No 'benny only three' Mattie said, and if I had turned round to see her thoughts about her being a bad mother, they were averted then. Or perhaps they already gone. After all, the kids was running, cool, well-kept, and unbruised.

One, never those things registered. On the other I was trying to come to grips with the strange thing that had just happened, and the usual strange thing I thought I was hearing—that the little girl had been attached to the white line had the name we had planned to give our child. If our child turned out to be a girl.

Ka-I said, 'Marvelled, really? As if my rock, my tree, my shelter, my
relative, struck the back of her head. Her mother was so, what, an old-

Not, Mattie said. That's the best she can do. It's a new word. It's from the Greek. It means I yake. She shifted, and the screen was as if I poked it out of a baby-name book. While I was pregnant, I kind of went Oprah. Better than going postal, I guess."

It's a lovely name, Lisa. And I know you are a very good person.

What went through my mind at that time was surely I had never read over a meal at Christmas. I had been about Peter's young first brother and Frank had had the whole of his first ones. Even Peter was amazed not to remember a bit of the incident. I asked him and he streamed down his cheeks.

One Easter Frank said, when Pur was being visited and visited, gotten them up for an Easter egg hunt. They were just sitting on

over a hundred colored hard-boiled eggs are and the house the evening before, after getting the kids over to their grandparents. A high old Easter morning was had by all, at least until Johanna looked up from the patio, where she was counting her share of the spoils, and shrieked. There was Petie, crawling gaily around on the second-floor overhang at the back of the house, not six feet from the drop to the concrete patio.

Mr. Arlen had rescued Petie while the rest of the family stood below, holding hands, frozen with horror and fascination. Mrs. Arlen had repeated the Hail Mary over and over (so fast she sounded like one of the Chipmunks on that old Witch Doctor record, Frank had said, laughing harder than ever) until her husband had disappeared back into the open bedroom window with Petie in his arms. Then she had swooned to the pavement, breaking her nose. When asked for an explanation, Petie had told them he'd wanted to check the rain gutter for eggs.

I suppose every family has at least one story like that, the survival of the world's Peties and Kyras is a convincing argument—in the minds of parents, anyway—for the existence of God.

"I was so scared," Mattie said, now looking fourteen again. Fifteen at most.

"But it's over," I said. "And Kyra's not going to go walking in the road anymore. Are you, Kyra?"

She shook her head against her mother's shoulder without raising it. I had an idea she'd probably be asleep before Mattie got her back to the good old doublewide.

"You don't know how bizarre this is for me," Mattie said. "One of my favorite writers comes out of nowhere and saves my kid. I knew you had a place on the TR, that big old dog house everyone calls Sara Laughs, but folks say you don't come here anymore since your wife died."

"For a long time I couldn't," I said. "If Sara was a marriage instead of a house, you'd call this a trial reconciliation."

She smiled fleetingly, then looked grave again. "I want to ask you for something. A favor."

"Ask away."

"Don't talk about this. It's not a good time for Ki and me."

"Why not?"

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She bit her lip and seemed to consider, answering the question, "I might not have asked, given an extra minute to consider, but I don't think I should." She shook her head. "It's just not. And I don't regret it. I'm just glad about what just happened in town. More friends, that's a good thing."

"No problem."

"You mean it?"

Sure, I'm basically a summer person who last time attended a "family reunion" which means I don't have many friends to turn to now. There was Bill Dear, of course, but I don't keep in contact with him. Not that he wouldn't know. If this little lady thought that I was going to find out about her daughter's attempt to get her ex-husband shanked, she was feeling herself. I think we've seen her already, to say the least. Take a look up at Brooklyn's Garage. Peck. I don't see

She said and sighed. Two old men were standing on the farm—where there had been gas pumps once upon a time. One was very likey Brooks himself, I thought. I could see the remnants of the flyaway hair on which had always made him look like a dowdy, starchy old Broke the Clown. The other, old enough to make Brooks look like a wax figure, and, was leaning on a gold-headed cane in a way that was distinctly un-

"I can't do anything about them," she said, sounding depressed. "Nobody can do anything about them. I guess I should go out myself. Lucky it's a holiday and there's only two of them."

Besides, I added, they probably didn't see me. When I got to the things, first that half-a-dozen cars and pickup trucks had been standing here, and second, that whatever Bruns and his old friend hadn't seen, they would be more than happy to make up.

On Matt's shoulder, Kyra gave a ladylike smile. Matt gave a nod in return and gave her a smile full of rage and love. I'm sorry we're in these circumstances that make me look like such a cop, but I really am a big fan. They say at the bookstore—Castro Book—that you've got a new one coming out this summer.

I nodded. "It's called *Helen's Promise*

She grinned "Good title "

Thanks. You better get your booty back home before you lose your arm."

"Yeah."

There are people in this world who have a knack for asking embarrassing awkward questions without meaning to—it's like a talent for walking into doors. I am one of that tribe, and as I walked with her toward the passenger side of the Scout, I found a good one. And yet it was hard to blame myself too enthusiastically. I had seen the wedding ring on her hand, after all.

"Will you tell your husband?"

Her smile stayed on, but it paled somehow. And tightened. If it were possible to delete a spoken question the way you can delete a line of type when you're writing a story, I would have done it.

"He died last August."

"Mattie, I'm sorry. Open mouth, insert foot."

You don't know. A girl my age isn't even supposed to be married, is she? And if she is, her husband's supposed to be in the army or something.

There was a pink baby-seat—also Kmart, I guessed—in the passenger side of the Scout. Mattie tried to boost Kyra in, but I could see she was struggling. I stepped forward to help her, and for just a moment, as I reached past her to grab a plump leg, the back of my hand brushed her breast. She couldn't step back unless she wanted to risk Kyra's slithering out of the seat and onto the floor, but I could feel her recording the touch. My husband's dead, not a threat, so the big-deal writer thinks it's okay to cop a little feel on a hot summer morning. And what can I say? Mr. Big Deal came along and saved my kid out of the road, maybe saved her life.

No, Mattie, I may as well say you're a bitch, but I can't say that. Except I couldn't say that, it would only make things worse. I felt my cheeks flush a little.

"How old *are* you?" I asked, when we had the baby squared away and were back at a safe distance.

She gave me a look. Tired or not, she held it together again. "Old enough to know the situation I'm in." She held out her hand. "Thanks again, Mr. Newman. God sent you along at the right time."

No, God just told me I needed a hamburger at the Village Cafe. I

said. "Or maybe it was His opposite number, the sexy delis, doing business at the same old stand."

She smiled. It wanted to face me, keep me. "I was going to tell you that. Hell, it's there when kisses are done right to tell you when you take HDs. Unless someone wears a condom, of course. I asked for something like shrimp tetrazzini. I thought it would be like I was dead of a heart attack."

"Yeah. Well, when I get copies of the new book, I'll give you one."

The smile continued, hanging in there, but now it slack. It wanted attention. "You don't need to do that, Mr. Noonan."

"No, but I will. My agent gets me fifty comps. I find that as I get older, they go further."

Perhaps she heard more in my voice than I had meant to, or that other people do sometimes, I guess.

"All right. I'll look forward to it."

I took another look at the baby sleeping in that quietly cascading the way the hair—her head tilted over on her shoulder, her eyelids, little lips pursed on, allowing a bubble. Their skin is what kills me—so much imperfection, seem to be no pores at all. Her Sex hat was askew. Mattie watched the reaction and readjusted so the visors made her across her forehead.

"Kyra," I said.

Mattie nodded. "Ladylike."

Kia is an African name, I said. It means seasons beginning. I left her then, giving her a little wave as I headed back to the car system of the Clavy. I could feel her curious eyes on me and I had the same feeling that I was going to cry.

That feeling stayed with me long after the two of them were out of sight. It was still with me when I got to the Village Cafe. I walked into the dining room, not to the left of the air-brand gas pumps and just sat there to wait for the waiter, thinking about Jo and about the one pregnancy test and what that cost twenty-two-fifty. A little secret she waited to keep and she was absolutely sure. That must have been it, was so, so, so, it had to be.

Kia, I said. Seasons beginning. But the mood had been broken again, so I got out of the car and slammed the door and I told myself as if I could keep the sadness inside that way.

CHAPTER

8

Buddy Jolson was just the same, all right — same dirty cooks whites and spotty white apron, same black hair under a paper cap stained with either beer or sock or strawberry juice. Even, from the look, the same satirical comic cramps caught in his rigged mustache. He was maybe fifty-five and maybe seventy, which in some genetically favored men seems to be still within the farthest borders of middle age. He was aged and stumpy — probably six-four, three hundred pounds — and just as full of grace, wit, and *professionalism* as he had been four years before.

You were a gent, or do you remember? he grunted, as if he'd last been in yesterday.

'You still make the Villageburger Deluxe?'

Does a crow shit in the pine tops? Pie eyes regarding me. No condolences, which was fine by me.

Most likely I'd have one with everything — a Villageburger, not a crow — plus a chocolate trappé. Good to see you again.

I lettered my hand. He looked surprised but touched it with his own. Unlike the whites, the apron, and the hat, the hand was clean. Even the nails were clean. Yuh — he said, then turned to the sallow woman creep-

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ping or on the side of the great Village Center Audrey House. "Do through the garden."

I had to hurry, sit at the winter kitchen table, but I had to look both near the cooler and wait for Buddy to come. It was not Audrey short orders, but she doesn't waitress. I waited to know if Buddy's was a good place to do it. There were napkins, flowers, sandwiches and drinking sodas straight from the can. But it was about it people with sampan. Sort goes would have to be served at the Village Cafe, and even then you'd likely have to go through the door kicking and screaming. The floor was a red green Indian with a red line topography of hills and valleys. Like Buddy's uniform, it was none too clean (the sampan people who am in place by failed to notice his hands). The woodwork was green and dark. Above it where the plaster started, there were a number of bumper stickers—Buddy's idea of decoration.

HORN BROKEN. WATCH FOR FINGER

WIFE AND DOG MISSING. REWARD FOR DOG

THERE'S NO TOWN DRUNK HERE, WE ALL TAKE TURNS

Humor is almost always anger with its makeup on. I think that it is that owns the makeup tends to be thin. Three over-the-top faces apartnetically at the bar, and the left of the soft drink counter were two dangling strips of fly, open, bald. Then fly strip, pad with white, some of it still struggling freely. It was a cork, look at these and stomach your digestion was probably doing okay.

I thought about a similarity of names when I was very young. A coincidence. I thought about a young, pretty girl who had a couple a mother at sixteen or seventeen and a wife at twenty or twenty-one. I thought about inadvertently reaching her or use, and how the world judged men in their forties who said they discovered the secret of the world of young women and their necessities. Most of the things of the queer thing that had happened to me when a Mattie. I had a creek's name—that was that my mother and I had not been so badly flooded with cold, mineral tangy water. That *rub*.

When my burger was ready, Buddy had to eat twice. When I went over to get it, he said: "You back to stay or to clear out?"

"Why?" I asked. "Did you miss me, Buddy?"

Nap—he said, "but at least you're from in state. Did you know that Massachusetts' is Piscataqua for 'asshole'?"

"You're as funny as ever," I said.

Yeh. I'm going on fuckin' Letterman. Explain to him why God gave seagulls wings."

"Why was that, Buddy?"

So they could beat the fuckin' Frenchmen to the dump.

I got a newspaper from the rack and a straw for my trappe. Then I detoured to the pay phone and, tucking my paper under my arm, opened the phone book. You could actually walk around with it if you wanted. It wasn't tethered to the phone. Who, after all, would want to steal a Castle County telephone directory?

There were over twenty Devores, which didn't surprise me very much—at some of those names, like Pelkey or Bowie or Toothaker, that you kept coming across if you lived down here. I imagine it's the same everywhere—some families breed more and travel less, that's all.

There was a Devore listing for RD Wesp HJ Rd—but it wasn't for a Mattie, Matilda, Martha, or M. It was for Lance. I looked at the front of the phone book and saw it was a 1997 model, printed and mailed while Mattie's husband was still in the land of the living. Okay—but there was something else about that name: Devore, Devore, let us now praise famous Devores, wherefore art thou Devore? But it wouldn't come, whatever it was.

I ate my burger, drank my squelched ice cream, and tried not to look at what was caught on the flypaper.

While I was waiting for the salow-silent Aadrey to give me my change you could still eat all week in the Village Cafe for fifty dollars—if your blood vessels could stand it. That was, I read the sticker pasted to the cash register. It was another Baldy Jellison special: CYBERSPACE SCARED ME SO I A.D.D. WAS LOADED IN MY TANKS. This didn't exactly convulse me with mirth, but it *did* provide the key for solving one of the day's mysteries: why the name Devore had seemed not just familiar but evocative.

I was financially well-off, rich by the standards of many. There was at

lucky person who trusts to the Heavens that she will find the person she is looking for and that the Heavens are not going to let her down. Residents of the lakes region like to visit the area in the summer and walking around

"Audrey, is Max Devore still alive?"

She gave me a little smile. "Oh, yes. But we don't see him too often."

That got me a glimpse of me, that all-aroundly speaker who has been able to chat Audrey when she was once a lovely young woman who worked like a candidate for a liver transplant, who read books and gave us librarians a grim glare from the back of the room when she was reading a flyer all out the bloody NASCAR race at Oxford Plains.

I drove back the way I had come. All I got home, a car that sat in the middle of a hot day, it leaves cooling things and a heavy sweat. All I wanted was to go home that didn't wear less than two coats of paint and was already thinking of it as a moment when I had in the car, but room under the revolving fan and she got a couple of hours.

When I passed Wasp Hill Road, I slowed down. The house was hanging listlessly on the lines, and there was no afterthoughts in the front yard, but the seat was gone. Mattie and Kyra were in the car again. I imagined and headed on down to the post office. I used their bath, and quite a lot. Mattie's short red hair, which had been a shock to her somehow to Max Devore, but looking at the rest of it, a car with its dirt driveway and a fading front yard, a car with Mattie's baggy shorts and Kmart smock top, and the car that had been a strong one.

Before retiring to Palm Springs in the late eighties, Maxwell W. Devore had seen a young force in the computer revolution, less than a young people's revolution, but Devore did know for a decade of the knew the playing field and understood the rules. He started, for a memory was still a magnificent tip, instead of in computer, I put it forward case sized, and here did UNIVAC was still a new art. He was in COBOL, and spoke FORTRAN, knew a few. As the world expanded around his ability to keep up, expanded to the point where he seemed to define the world, he bought the talent he needed to keep growing.

His company, Visions, had created scanning programs which could upload hard copy into floppy disks almost instantaneously, it created graphics imaging programs which had become the industry standard, it created Pixel Latch, which allowed laptop users to mouse paint — to actually fingerpaint, if their gadget came equipped with what Jo had called the citratal cursor. Devore had invented none of this later stuff, but he'd anticipated that it *could* be invented and had hired people to do it. He held dozens of patents and co-held hundreds more. He was supposedly worth something like six hundred million dollars, depending on how technology stocks were doing on any given day.

On the TR he was reputed to be crusty and unpleasant. No surprise there, to a Nazarene, can any good thing come out of Nazareth? And folks said he was eccentric, of course. Listen to the old timers who remember the rich and successful in their salad days (and all the old timers claim they do), and you'd hear that they ate the wallpaper, tracked the dog, and sawed up at church suppers wearing nothing but rice-pee-stained BVDs. Even if all that was true in Devore's case, and even if he was S. Ruggie McDuck in the bargain, I doubted that he'd allow two of his closest relatives to live in a worldwide trader.

I drove up the lane above the lake, then paused at the head of my driveway, looking at the sign there. SARATOGA'S turned into a length of varnished board nailed to a sandy tree. It's the way they do things down here. Looking at it brought back the last dream of the Mandriley series. In that dream someone had slapped a radio-station sticker on the sign, the way you're always seeing stickers slapped on turnpike toll-collection baskets in the exact-change lanes.

I got out of my car, went to the sign, and studied it. No sticker. The sunflowers had been down there, growing out of the stoop. I had a photo in my suitcase that proved it — but there was no radio-station sticker on the house sign. Proving exactly what? Come on, Noonan, get a grip.

I started back to the car — the door was open, the Beach Boys spilling out of the speakers — then changed my mind and went back to the sign again. In the dream, the sticker had been posted just above the RA of SARATOGA and the CA of FALGHS. I touched my fingers to that spot and

though at this time away from the shore. Or, conversely, it may have been the technology of the ship, or the crew, or the weather.

I drove a white Buick House parked street-side on a steeply sloping hillside in Darkwood, and the dozen or so cars parked in front of me were always seen in order and listened to in order. Don't worry, when I've always thought it was the rest of the Buick Boys, and in the spirit of the happy years, but because of them I have a new love song. I love you, baby, Brian Wilson sings nothing, and you are with me. And oh folks, wouldn't that be a world.

I sat there listening and looked at the canner's table on the right side of the store. We kept our garbage in there to catch the garbage-eating raccoons. Even cans with soap around showed it. Always, that is, raccoons are hungry enough they search with their paws for lids with their clever little hands.

Yours truly,
mean . . . are you?

It seemed I was—or that I was at least going to have a go. When the Beach Boys gave way to Rare Earth, I got out of the car opened the storage cabinet, and pulled out two plastic garbage cans. There was a guy named Stan Protix who came down to sink the trash twice a week for there was four years ago, I reminded myself, one of B.I.D.'s farflung network of part-timers working for cash off the books. But I didn't think Stan would have been down to collect the current accumulation of swill because of the no-dump, and I was right. There were two plastic garbage bags in each can. I snaked them out—using myself as a tool even when I was using it—and untwisted the yellow ties.

I really don't think I was so careless that I would have dumped a bunch of wet garbage out on my stoop if it had not rained that day. I'll never know for sure—and maybe that's for the best—but I say. No one has lived in the house for four years, and there is no kitchen that produces garbage—everything from coffee grounds to used sanitary napkins. The stuff in these jars was very trashy, wet, rotten, and carted out by Brenda Meserve's cleaning crew.

There were no vacuum cleaner disposal bags, not more than one monthly dust dirt and ceiling. There was was a paper towel.

some smelling of aromatic furniture polish and others of the saarper but still pleasant aroma of Windex. There was a moldy mattress pad and a silk jacket which had that unmistakable dined-upon-by-moths look. The jacket certainly caused me no regrets, a mistake of my young manhood, it looked like something from the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus" era. Goo-goo-jooob, baby.

There was a box filled with broken glass — another filled with unrecognized (and presumably out-of-date) plumbing fixtures — a torn and fifth-square of carpet — done-to-death dishtowels, faded and ragged — the eleven gloves I'd used when cooking burgers and chicken on the barbecue . . .

The sticker was in a twist at the bottom of the second bag. I'd known I would find it — from the moment I'd felt that faintly tacky patch on the sign, I'd known — but I'd needed to see it for myself. The same way old Deabing Thomas had needed to get the blood under his fingernails, I suppose.

I placed my hand on a board of the sunwarmed stoop and smoothed it out with my hand. It was shredded around the edges. I guessed Bill had probably used a putty-knife to scrape it off. He hadn't wanted Mr. Norman to come back to the lake after four years and discover some beered-up kid had slapped a radio station sticker on his driveway sign. Gorry, no — it wouldn't be proper, clean. So off it had come and into the trash it had gone — and here it was again, another piece of my nightmare unearthed and not much the worse for wear. I ran my fingers over it. WBLM, 102.9, PORTLAND'S ROCK AND ROLL BLIMP.

I told myself I didn't have to be afraid. That it meant nothing, just as all the rest of it meant nothing. Then I got the broom out of the cabinet, swept all the trash together, and dumped it back in the plastic bags. The sticker went in with the rest.

I went inside meaning to shower the dust and grime away, then spied my own bathing suit — still lying in one of my open suitcases — and decided to go swimming instead. The suit was a jolly number, covered with spearing whales, that I had purchased in Key Largo. I thought my pop in the Bosox car would have approved. I checked my watch and saw

but I had to start my AOL charger on my computer. It was enough for government work. I was especially into the energetic game of Trash-Bag Treasure Hunt.

I paled at my secret woodland howl that night as I walked from Sara to the water. My flip flops slipped and I slipped. A whole mosquito hummed. The lake came in front of me, still and average, under the low midnight sky. Running, I fell handsprings along its edge, ordering the entire east side of the lake was a gift of wilderness to my property in the deeds which I kept in the TR simplicity of The Street. If one were to turn left off The Street, the first of my steps one could walk all the way down to the Dark Side Marine pass on Warrington's and Biddy Johnson's Jazzy Little Party on the way, not to mention four dozen summer cottages, a secretively wooded rising and groves of spruce and pine. Turn right and you could walk to Highway, although it would take you a day to do it with The Street overgrown the way it is now.

I stood there for a moment on the path, then ran forward and leaped into the water. Even as I flew through the air with the greatest of ease, it occurred to me that the last time I had jumped in like this, I had been holding my wife's hand.

Touching down was almost catastrophic. The water was cold enough to remind me that I was forty, not thirteen, and for a moment it felt as if I stopped dead in my chest. As Dark Side Lake closed over my head, I felt quite sure that I wasn't going to come up alive. I doctored my legs down between the swimming float and my little stretch of The Street, a victim of cold water and a greasy Villagebanger. They'll have Your Mother Always Said To Wait At Least An Hour in my tombstone.

Then my feet landed on the stones and sandy we estaff grew with the tide. The bottom, my heart kick started, and I shoved toward the surface, putting my hand to my forehead. I was back home, the last secret of a life's basketball game. As I returned to the air, I gasped. Water went in my mouth and I coughed it back out, patting one hand against my chest in an effort to calm down my heart. Come on, baby, keep going, you can do it.

I came back down standing waist deep in the lake, and with the mouthful of that cold taste. I knew her with an ankle tingle, a

as, the kind you'd have to correct for when you washed your clothes. It was exactly what I had tasted while standing on the shoulder of Route 68. It was what I had tasted when Mattie Devore told me her daughter's name.

I taste a paradox that does not fit: it's all. From the similarity of the damns to my dead wife to this lake. Which

Which I have tasted a time or two before,' I said out loud. As if to underline the fact, I scooped up a palmful of water—some of the cleanest and clearest in the state, according to the analysis reports I and all the other members of the so-called Western Lakes Association get each year—and drank it down. There was no revelation, no sudden weird flashes in my head. It was just Dark Score, first in my mouth and then in my stomach.

I swam out to the float, climbed the three-rung ladder on the side, and flopped on the hot boards, feeling suddenly very glad I had come. In spite of everything. Tomorrow I would start putting together some sort of a tie-down here—trying to, anyway. For now it was enough to be lying with my head in the crook of one arm on the verge of a doze, confident that the day's adventures were over.

As it happened, that was not quite true.

During our first summer on the TR, Jo and I discovered it was possible to see the Castle Rock fireworks show from the deck overlooking the lake. I remembered this just as it was drawing down toward dark, and thought that this year I would spend that time in the living room, watching a movie on the video player. Reliving all the Fourth of July fireworks we had spent out there, drinking beer and laughing as the big ones went off would be a bad idea. I was lonely enough without that, lonely in a way of which I had not been conscious in Derry. Then I wondered what I had come down here for (if not to finally face Johannes me not—al, et al.) and I put it to living rest. Certainly the possibility of writing again had never seemed more distant than it did that night.

There was no beer. I'd forgotten to get a sixpack either at the General Store or at the Village Cafe—but there was soda courtesy of Brenda Meserve. I got a can of Pepsi and settled in to watch the lights now, hop-

ing it would hurt too much. He ought to know that I was old. Not that I was kidding myself, there were more than a few things I just have to get through there.

The first explosion of the night had just gone off, spilling sparks of blue with the bang travelling far enough when the phone rang. I made no jump as the faint explosion from Castle Rock came, I decided it was probably Bud Dean calling long distance to see if I was settling in all right.

In the summer before I moved, we'd gotten a wireless phone so we could prow the downstairs while we talked a thing we both liked to do. I went through the sliding glass door into the living room, picked up the pickup button, and said "Hello, this is Max." As I went back to the desk chair and sat down. Far across the lake, exploding below the clouds hanging over Castle View, were green and yellow stars that followed by soundless flashes that would eventually resolve me as noise.

For a moment there was nothing from the phone and then a man's raspy voice — an elderly voice but not Bud Dean's — said "Noon ya' Mr Noonan?"

Yes? A huge spangle of gold lit up the west sky, the clouds with brief bligree. It made me think of the ward she was on in television, all those beautiful women in shiny dresses.

"Devore."

"Yes?" I said again, cautiously.

"Max Devore."

We'd all been in the fire for a few. As they have said I had to get out of Yankee wit, but apparently she'd been serious. Wonders never ceased.

Okay, what next? I was at a total loss for conversational gambits, the thought of asking him how he'd gotten my number, which was an stupid, but what would be the point? When you were worth over a half million dollars — if this really was *Mr* Max Devore — I was talking to — I could get any old unlisted number you wanted.

I settled for saying yes again, this time with a direct, cut to the end.

Another silence followed. When I broke it up by asking questions, he would be in charge of the conversation — I was clearly a

to be having a conversation at that point. A good game, but I had the advantage of my long association with Harold Oblowsky to fall back on. Harold, master of the pregnant pause. I sat tight, cradling little carefree phone to my ear, and watched the show in the west. Red bursting into blue, green into gold, unseen women walked the clouds in glowing award-show evening dresses.

"I understand you met my daughter-in-law today," he said at last. He sounded annoyed.

"I may have done," I said, trying not to sound surprised. "May I ask why you're calling, Mr. Devore?"

"I understand there was an incident."

White lights danced in the sky—they could have been exploding spacecraft. Then, trailing after the bangs, *I could never be sure of time travel*, I thought. *It's an auditory phenomenon.*

My hand was holding the phone far too tightly, and I made it relax. Maxwell Devore. Had a billion dollars. Not in Palm Springs, as I had supposed, but close—right here in the TR, if the characteristic underhum on the line could be trusted.

I'm concerned for my granddaughter. His voice was raspier than ever. He was angry, and it showed—this was a man who hadn't had to conceal his emotions in a lot of years. "I understand my daughter-in-law's attention wandered again. It wanders often."

Now half a dozen colored starbursts at the night, blooming like flowers in a good Disney nature film. I could imagine the crowds gathered on Castle View's trunk, cross-legged on their blankets, eating ice cream cones and drinking beer and all going *Gooseb* at the same time. That's what makes any successful work of art. I think—everybody goes *Omigod* at the same time.

You can't see it, but I can tell you. He asked *What can you see, that it be so bad?* I had to feel for a moment, *it's not a bad thing, it's a warning. It's a warning that's a man who can be dangerous.*

Then Matthew said, *Mr. Novich, I know that and that's not like that, like that has ever happened to me before.*

Of course that's what most adult mothers say in such circumstances, I imagined . . . but I had believed her.

BAG OF BONES

Also, given that my number was a small fraction of the total, with a small wage, my contribution was negligible. I did not have—

"Mr. Devore, I don't have any idea what—"

Don't give me that, with all due respect, on the same day Mr. Norman you were seen talking to them. He's a book and I read. McCarthy's tended to these poor sentences who said I produced dirty comics when they come out, it's a matter of

$$B_{k+1, n_k} / M_{k+1} \leqslant 1 \leqslant B_{k+1, n_k} / M_{k+1} / \dots$$

"I presume they're the ones you're talking about."

"No, you saw a *car*—walking on the road," he said. And that you saw a woman chasing after her. Mr. Magister, in a car that he thinks she drives. The car could have been a runaway. When we are protecting that young woman, Mr. Newman? Did she propose you saw anything? You're certainly doing the child no favors. I can't do you that much."

So a person has to take me back to reality, and that takes time, and, I thought of saying, 'You put me at risk, but I'll be here if I do keep mine shut—is that what you want to hear?'

casim, Mike—you could regret it

Why was I bothering to protect Matteo Divera anyway? I didn't know. Didn't have the slightest idea of what I ought to be doing out here, for that matter. I only knew that sacred house, tree, and the child hadn't been bruised or frightened or sullen.

'There was a car An old Jeep'

That's more like it. Satisfaction. And she's into it, she's a room.
"What did..."

I guess I assumed they came in the car together. I see. There was certainly a great pleasure in discovering my capacity for love. I had not deserved it. I felt like a pitcher who can't control the ball in the crowd but who can still throw a pretty good shot in the corner of the net. The little girl in it now tells me I was. All right, she goes home.

tions, as if I were testifying in court instead of sitting on my deck. Harold would have been proud. Well, no. Harold would have been horrified that I was having such a conversation at all.

I think I assumed they were picking wildflowers. My memory of the incident is that it is clear, unfortunately I'm a writer, Mr. Devore, and when I'm driving I often drift off into my own private—

You're lying. The anger was right out in the open now, bright and pulsing like a ball. As I had suspected, it hadn't taken much effort to escort this guy past the social niceties.

"Mr. Devore. The computer Devore, I assume?"

"You assume correctly."

Jo always grew cooler in tone and expression as her not inconsiderable temper grew hotter. Now I heard myself emulating her in a way that was frankly eerie. Mr. Devore, I'm not accustomed to being called in the evening by men I don't know, nor do I intend to prolong the conversation when a man who does so calls me a liar. Good evening, sir.

"If everything was fine, then why did you stop?"

"I've been away from the TR for some time, and I wanted to know if the Village Gate was still open. Oh, by the way—I don't know where you got my telephone number, but I know where you can put it. Good night."

I broke the connection with my thumb and then just looked at the phone, as if I had never seen such a gadget in my life. The hand holding it was trembling. My heart was beating hard, I could feel it in my neck and wrists as well as my chest. I wondered if I could have told Devore to stick my phone number up his ass if I hadn't had a few million rattling around in the bank myself.

The Battle of the Titans was it, Jo said in her cool voice. And all over a teenage girl's mistake. So you don't owe me money to speak of.

I laughed out loud. War of the Titans? Hardly. Some old robber baron from the turn of the century had said, "These days a man with a million dollars thinks he's rich." Devore would likely have the same opinion of me, and in the wider scheme of things he would be right.

Now the western sky was aught with unnatural, pulsing color. It was the finale.

BAG OF BONES

"What was that all about?" I asked.

No answer, only a few, in the crowd. "Pro or con?"

But up went my arm and I set the phone back on my
reaction. I said that I was expecting it to turn out as expected. Don't
start spouting my own theories. I said, "I'm not a scientist, I'm a
man. I don't have an E.E.G. but I can tell you, I'm not a scientist."

The phone didn't ring. I picked it up rest of my life when I could. I was a misunderstood shy kid and was the last to be at any social gathering. I didn't even cry weeping and was not out there on the field. I was pushed me out of myself. In a way, I was grateful to my

I went into the north bedroom unaddressed and I found her lying there about the time girl Kyra and the mother who could have been her older sister Devore was pissed at Mattie that much was clear, but I was a financial moment to the girl, what an asshole of me. And what kind of resources would she have if he had been against her. That was a pretty nasty thought, actually, and it was the one I'd been spoon-

Eighteen hours later I was in the same place. I had not slept. I lay down before retiring, and as I was about to close my eyes, I heard the snoring again. A shiver ran down my spine, and I was startled and frightened. — or perhaps just surprised to find that I had not

Don't, I said. I was standing naked before the whole world, and I was
a slave with a god selfish. Please don't test it up with this sort of slavery.

The crying dwindled as it had before, seeming to pass by in a rushing current, carried down a tunnel. I went back to the truck, got out, and closed my eyes.

"It was a dream," I said. Just another Manderley dream."

I knew better, but I also knew I was going to do it. I thought about it a lot more than that service like the report of the. As I tried to, I did so in a voice that was purely my own: *She is alive. Sara is alive.*

And I understood something, too: she was glad to know I had reclaimed her. For good or ill, I had come home.

CHAPTER

9

At nine o'clock the following morning I filled a squeeze-bottle with grapefruit juice and set out for a good long walk south along The Street. The day was bright and already hot. It was also silent—the kind of silence you experience only after a Saturday holiday, I think, one composed of equal parts of hush and hangover. I could see two or three fishermen parked far out on the lake, but not a single power boat buzzed, not a single gaggle of kids shouted and splashed. I passed half a dozen cottages on the slope above me, and although all of them were likely inhabited at this time of year, the only signs of life I saw were bathing suits hanging over the duck rail at the Passendales' and a half-deflated fluorescent-green seascourse on the Batchelders' stub of a dock.

But did the Passendales' little gray cottage still belong to the Passendales? Did the Batchelders' amusing circular summer-camp with its Cicerone picture window pointing at the lake and the mountains sky and still belong to the Batchelders? No way of telling, of course. Four years can bring a lot of changes.

I washed and made no effort to rinse—an old trick from my writing days. Work your body, rest your mind, let the boys in the basement do

them as I had the way, and then when I saw I had no drinks at hand, I went to get them, the usual thing I do. I took up the sponge I had been using, I put it to my forehead, and I wanted to see what thoughts might come.

The first was a strange realization that the other side of the veil seems somehow more real than the side from Max Devere. I had been occupied by a matter of obviousness. I thought I was on my first, the evening truck of the R. R. Had and my excitement that I was at one point of was considering the case. But I was there was beside the point. I knew I had a point, but it was something I could not believe in. The Ghost of Dark Side I was known as the mysterious fires as The Mysterious Crying Kiddle.

My next thought, this was just before I had started to go to sleep. I saw I could Mattie Devere and tell her what I had seen. I had a natural impulse out probably I had said I was too tired to go to see, simple as The Damsel in Distress Verses The Wives of the Sea.

But in this case, Father-in-Law I had my own wish to try this side, and I didn't want to complicate my life by getting into a potentially violent dispute between Mr. Computer and Mrs. Devere. Devere had been my father the wrong way, and a good way. But that probably wasn't personal, only something he did is a matter of course. It is a nice little story, my traps. Did I want to get it all back on this? No, I don't. But I had saved Little Miss Red Sox. I had gotten myself into a very nice room. My father's small but pleasantly firm, a rest, but I knew that he was a Greek. I was like. Any more than that would be the glory of it.

I stopped at that point, set as well as brain, and I had seen the way to Warrington's, a vast barnyard, a structure with floors and times called the country club. It was sort of, there was a school, a golf course, a stable and riding trails, a restaurant, a bar, and, perhaps, perhaps three dozen in the main building, and the other side, a few buildings. There was even a two-mile bowling alley. It was a very nice place. I had to make a trip to take a trip, setting up the pins. Warrington's had been built around the beginning of World War I. But not to be more than Sara Laughs, but not by much.

A long dark, cold, and a little bit of a building, a very nice, but it

was there that Warrington's summer guests would gather for drinks at the end of the day (and some for Bloody Marys at the beginning). And when I glanced that way, I realized I was no longer alone. There was a woman standing on the perch to the left of the floating bar's door, watching me.

She gave me a pretty good jump. My nerves weren't in their best condition right then, and that probably had something to do with it—but I think she would have given me a jump in any case. Part of it was her staleness. Part was her extraordinary thinness. Most of it was her face. Have you ever seen that Edward Munch drawing, *The Cry*? Well, if you imagine that screaming face at rest, mouth closed and eyes watchful, you'll have a pretty good image of the woman standing at the end of the dock with one long-fingered hand resting on the rail. Although I must tell you that my first thought was not *Loraine Munch* but *Mrs. Danvers*.

She looked about seventy and was wearing black shorts over a black tank bathing suit. The combination looked strangely formal, a variation on the ever popular little black cocktail dress. Her skin was cream white, except above her nearly flat nose and along her bony shoulders. There it swam with large brown age-spots. Her face was a wedge featuring prominent skull-like cheekbones and an unlined lamp of brow. Beneath that bulge, her eyes were lost in sockets of shadow. White hair hung scant and lank around her ears and down to the prominent shelf of her jaw.

God, she's thin, I thought. She's nothing but a bag of

A snicker twisted through me at that. It was a strong one—as if someone were spinning a wire in my flesh. I didn't want her to notice that—what a way to start a summer day, by revolting a guy so badly that he stood there snaking and grimacing in front of you—so I raised my hand and waved. I tried to smile, as well. Hello there, lady standing out by the floating bar. Hello there, you old bag of bones, you scared the living shit out of me. But it doesn't take much these days and I forgive you. How the fuck ya do? I wondered if my smile looked as much like a grimace to her as it felt to me.

She didn't wave back.

Feeling quite a bit like a fool—*HIK! SNOY! AGE! D! IT HERE, WE ALL TAKE TURN!*—I ended my wave with a kind of half-assed salute and

headed back the way I'd come. I've started to feel that I've
 shoulder the sensation of her watchfulness as I've started to feel
 hand pressing between my shoulderblades.

The creek where she'd been was empty, and I noticed that her
 eyes at first sure she must have just retreated. I'd thought she'd
 thrown by the creek, ~~but~~ but she was gone. As if she'd been
 ghost herself.

Yes, perhaps she's stealthy. I said. *Yes, perhaps she's stealthy.*
you do know it, right?

Right, right. I murmured, sitting out north along the shore, and
 home. Of course I do. When I see I see it, I don't seem to me that
 had been time, it does seem to me that she could just stop. I'm even
 in her bare feet, with at me tearing her. Not in some quiet moment.
Jo again: Perhaps she's stealthy.

Yes, I murmured. I did stop teasing out her feet from my eyes.
 was over. Yes, perhaps she's. Perhaps she's stealthy. Sara. The Mr.
 Danvers.

I stopped again and looked back, but the light of dawn pale. I
 lower the lake around us, the air of course, and I could see the
 corner Warrington's or The Sunset Bar. And then I thought that was
 just as well.

On my way back, I tried to list the objects which had preceded
 then surrounded my return to Sara Lake: the repeating flowers, the
 sunflowers, the radio station sticker, the weeping in the night, I sup-
 posed that my encounter with Mattie and Kara, plus the following
 phone call from Mr. Pael Case, a so-called loss of string, and
 not in the same way as each of you reads being in the end.

And what about the fact that we had been in Derry, in the
 Dark Score when Johanna died? I thought of it, but I don't know. I
 know I couldn't even remember why that was. In the late winter
 of '25 I'd been holding a tray, serving a tray for *The River*. And I'd
 roary of '24 I got going on *The River*. I'd been out of work for
 most of my attention. Besides, I'd been going to work for the IR, west to
 Sara . . .

That was Jo's 60, I told the day, and as soon as I heard the words I understood how true they were. We'd both loved the old girl, but saying 'Hey Irish, let's get our asses over to the TR for a few days' had been Jo's 60. She might say it any time — except in the year before her death she hadn't said it once. And I had never thought to say it for her. Had somehow forgotten all about Sara Laugas, it seemed, even when summer came around. Was it possible to be that absorbed in a writing project? It didn't seem likely — but what other explanation was there?

Something was very wrong with this picture, but I didn't know what it was. Not from nothing.

That made me think of Sara Tidwell, and the lyrics to one of her songs. She had never been recorded, but I owned the Blind Lemon Jefferson version of this particular tune. One verse went

*It ain't nuthin but a barn-dance sugar
It ain't nuthin but a round-and round
Let me kiss you on your sweet lips sugar
You the good thing that I found*

I loved that song, and had always wondered how it would have sounded coming out of a woman's mouth instead of from that whiskey-voiced old troubadour. Out of Sara Tidwell's mouth. I bet she sang sweet. And boy, I bet she could swing it.

I had gotten back to my own place again. I looked around, saw no one in the immediate vicinity (although I could now hear the day's first skiffboat barring away downwater), stripped to my underpants, and swam out to the float. I didn't climb it, only lay beside it noddling onto the ladder with one hand and lazily kicking my feet. It was nice enough, but what was I going to do with the rest of the day?

I decided to spend it cleaning my work area on the second floor. When that was done, maybe I'd go out and look around in Jo's studio. If I didn't lose my courage, that was.

I swam back, kicking easily along, raising my head in and out of water when it flowed along my body like cool silk. I felt like an otter. I was most of the way to the shore when I raised my dripping face and saw

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a woman standing in the Street watching the Saxons enter. She moved down at Warrington's feet. Her face was red and green and pointing north like the path like a leaf in some wind.

I gasped, swallowed water, reached for a stick, but I didn't get deep water and I wiped my sweat on my eyes. The light came back on automatically. The woman was green because she was scared. I came a little to the north of where I set off, followed the steps up to the Street. And even with my eyes set of water, I was still a little creepy about how the eyes are and the dirty street, the man in the trunk almost make a peering face. The air was dirty, the street was dirty, the face was perfectly still, as still as the face of the statue in the church, shorts and that thing said had been over in a breeze. But it was a smile or frown or perhaps a laugh. But it was a smile or frown. One little branch patted off to the north, it was the old hand that stayed for a skinny arm and a bony, pointing hand.

It wasn't the first time I'd spooked myself like that. I see things that you. Write enough stories and every shadow on the wall looks like it's printing every line in the dirt like a secret message. When I did that, of course, ease the task of deciding what was really peculiar at it. A face is and what was peculiar on it because my own was peculiar.

I glanced around, saw I still had this part of the face, my mouth, though not for much longer, the face, the face of the first part of the face, then a second and third, and I stripped off my shirt and pants. I wrung them out, put them on top of the shirt, and I started and walked naked up the railroad steps with a little thing in my chest. I pretended I was Bunter bringing one last letter to the paper to Lord Peter Wimsey. But the time I got back to the door, I was grinning like a fool.

The second floor was still in spite of the fire, but it was a disaster. As soon as I got to the top of the stairs, I found a woman sitting on the floor, only a little roomy, head just under the door, was a little red with the steam, north of the door, in the room. At the end of the hall was the grille, snail of the most famous of the world, I bought the year after we bought the dog. I was a little of the world.

missed its character significance without even being aware of it. There was a sign taped to it which said, *Mr Noonan Broken Blood but don't let you turn it to & around I'll be doing this. Death is the part it needs to be moved, not White. I'll be in the Rack I'll move it when I see it. B. Mervin*

I grinned at that last—it was Mrs. M. right down to the ground—and then tried the switch. Machinery often responds favorably when it senses a penis-equipped human in the vicinity. Jo used to claim that, but not this time. I listened to the air conditioner grine for five seconds or so, then snapped it off. ‘Damn thing shit the bed,’ as TR folks like to say. And until it was fixed, I would be doing crossword puzzles up here.

I looked in my office just the same, as curious about what I might feel as about what I might find. The answer was next to nothing. There was the desk where I had finished *The Red-Shift Man*, thus proving to myself that the first time was not a flake; there was the photo of Richard Nixon, arms raised, flashing the double V for Victory sign, with the caption WOULDBE BUY A SECOND CAR FROM THE SMAN? running beneath; there was the ergag Jo had hooked for me a winter or two before she had discovered the wonderful world of arghans and pretty much gave up hooking.

It wasn't quite the office of a stranger, but every item (most of all, the weirdly empty surface of the desk) said that it was the workspace of an earlier generation Mike Noonan. Men's lives, I had read once, are usually defined by two primary forces: work and marriage. In my life the marriage was over and the career in what appeared to be permanent ruins. Given that, it didn't seem strange to me that now the space where I'd spent so many days—usually in a state of real happiness as I made up various imaginary lives—seemed to mean nothing. It was like looking at the office of an employee who had been fired—or who had died suddenly.

I started to give then had an idea. The filing cabinet in the corner was crammed with papers—bank statements, most eight or ten years out of date, correspondence (mostly never answered), a few story fragments—but I didn't find what I was looking for. I moved on to the closet, where the temperature had to be at least a hundred and ten degrees, and in a cardboard box which Mrs. M. had marked CLOSETS. I uncovered the first—a Sanyo Memo Scriber Debra Weinstock gave me at the

But I didn't want to say it. Not out loud. It seemed like a bad idea somehow.

I turned to leave the room, and a sudden sign of clear, amazing, in that heat, rushed past the sides of my face. Not my body, just my face. It was the most extraordinary sensation—like hands patting briefly but gently at my necks and forehead. At the same time there was a signing in my ears—except that's not quite right. It was a susurrus that went *past* my ears, like a whispered message spoken in a hurry.

I turned, expecting to see the curtains over the room's window in motion . . . but they hung perfectly straight.

Jo? I said, and hearing her name made me shiver so violently that I almost tripped the Memo-Scriber. Jo, was that you?

Nothing. No phantom hands patting my skin, no motion from the curtains—when there certainly would have been if there had been an actual draft. All was quiet. There was only a tall man with a sweaty face and a tape recorder under his arm standing in the doorway of a bare room—but that was when I first began to really believe that I wasn't alone in Sara Laughs.

Susurrus. I asked myself: *Even if I could see it, it's not. Ghosts can't hurt anyone.*

That's what I thought then.

When I visited Jo's studio, her *art* *could* *not* studio after lunch, I felt quite a lot better about Brenda Meserve—she hadn't taken too much on herself after all. The few items I especially remembered from Jo's little office—the framed square of her first afghan, the green rag rag, her framed poster depicting the wildflowers of Maine—had been put out here, along with almost everything else I remembered. It was as if Mrs. M had sent a message: *I don't know how to put a studio together, but I will try, so I've decided that my book box is my repository for all the stuff I love, and I will use the place as my closet's closet, so I can expect or unprepared. I can do that much.*

Out here were the bare walls, out here the walls posted with my wife's spirit and creativity. There were knitted things (some serious, many whimsical), batik squares, rag dolls popping out of what she called

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My baby clothes, and I still had some of them. There were a few black and orange silk net flower pin cushions even though the bookshelf went upstate to be constructed in my new house. Sera Fage is here. It was made out of two layers of silk flannel.

In one corner was her little book of flower patterns and I was reading it. In another was the book she had tried to learn and then gave up on saying it hurt her fingers too much. In a third was a book of poems, a pair of Rieber blades with scuffed tips and I tried to keep the tips of the laces.

The thing which caught and held my eye was set in a circle of top-dash in the center of the room. During the many cold winter festivals and winter weekends we had spent here, that circle top would have been cluttered with spoils of thread, skins of yarn, pieces of sketches, maybe a book about the Spanish Civil War, or the American dogs. Johanna could be aggravating at least to me because she imposed no real system or order on what she did. She could say it was not even overwhelming at times. She was a brilliant scatterbrain and her desk had always reflected that.

But not now. It was possible to think that Mrs. M. had taken the letter from the top of it and plunked down what was now the impossible to believe. Why would she? It made no sense.

The object was covered with a gray plastic film. I reached out to touch it, and my hand faltered an inch or two short of its moment in the old dream.

(give me that it's my dust-cat,ber)

It slipped across my mind much as that quiet craft had slipped across my face. Then it was gone, and I pried the plastic cover off. Underneath it was my old green IBM Selectric which I hadn't seen in years. I leaned closer, knowing that the type would be a Courier—my old favorite—even before I saw it.

What in God's name was my old typewriter doing here?

Johanna pointed out enough, not very well, she took strange notes every good ones included and sometimes said that she knew it since it dated, she weaved and dyed cloth she said, played a little bit

words on the guitar. She, *who* wrote, of course, most English majors can, which is why they become English majors. Did she demonstrate any blazing degree of literary creativity? No. After a few experiments with poetry as an undergrad, she gave up that particular branch of the arts as a bad job. *You're it, / photo of me. Make* she had said once. *I had a fall out. / I'd go to a little white / tetra / it / it / it.* Given the quality of her poems as opposed to the quality of her silks, photographs, and knitted art, I thought that was probably wise.

But here was my old IBM. Why?

Letters. I said. "She took it down cellar or something, and rescued it to write letters on."

Except that wasn't Jo. She showed me most of her letters, often urging me to write little postscripts of my own, guilt-tripping me with that old saying about how the shoemaker's kids always go barefoot (and the writer's friends would never hear from him if it weren't for Alexander Graham Bell, she was apt to add). I hadn't seen a typed personal letter from my wife in all the time we'd been married—if nothing else, she would have considered it shitty etiquette. She *could* type, producing mistake-free business letters slowly yet methodically, but she always used my desktop computer or her own PowerBook for those chores.

What were you up to, hon? I asked, then began to investigate her desk drawers.

Brenda Meserve had made an effort with these—but Jo's fund mental nature had dictated her. Surface order: spools of thread segregated by color, for instance, quickly gave way to Jo's old dear jumble. I found enough of her in those drawers to hurt my heart with a hundred unexpected memories, but I found no paperwork which had been typed on my old IBM, with or without the Court of bids. Not so much as a single page.

When I was finished with my hunt, I leaned back in my chair *oh* chair, and looked at the little framed photo on her desk, one I couldn't remember ever having seen before. Jo had most likely printed it herself (the original might have come out of some local's attic, and then hand tinted, the result). The final product looked like a wanted poster colored by Ted Turner.

I picked it up and ran the ball of my thumb over the glass facing,

It ain't nuthin' but a barn dance sugar, I sang, patting the picture back on the desk. It ain't nuthin' but a round and round.

I picked up the typewriter cover, then decided to leave it off. As I stood, my eyes went back to Sara, standing there with her eyes closed, and the string which served her as a guitar strap visible over one shoulder. Something in her face and smile had always struck me as familiar, and suddenly it came to me. She looked oddly like Robert Johnson, whose primitive licks had behind the chords of almost every Led Zepplin and Yardbirds song ever recorded. Who, according to the legend, had gone down to the crossroads and sold his soul to Satan for seven years of fast living, high tension liquor, and streetlife babies. And for a fake-out brand of immortality, of course. Which he had gotten. Robert Johnson, supposedly poisoned over a woman.

In the late afternoon I went down to the store and saw a good-looking piece of flounder in the cold case. It looked like supper to me. I bought a bottle of white wine to go with it, and while I was waiting my turn at the cash register, a trembling old man's voice spoke up behind me. See ya made a new friend yest'ry? The Yankee accent was so thick that it sounded almost like a joke—except the accent itself is only part of it. Mostly, I've come to believe, it's that singsong tone—red Mainers all sound like auctioneers.

I turned and saw the geezer who had been standing out on the garage tarmac the day before, watching along with Dickie Brooks as I got to know Kyra, Mattie, and Soaric. He still had the gold-headed cane, and I now recognized it. Sometime in the 1950s the *Boston Post* had donated one of those canes to every county in the New England states. They were given to the oldest residents and passed along from old fart to old fart. And the joke of it was that the *Post* had gone out of business years ago.

Actually two new friends, I replied, trying to dredge up his name. I couldn't, but I remembered him from when Jo had been alive, hoarding down one of the overstuffed chairs in Dickie's waiting room, discussing weather and politics, politics and weather, as the numbers whanged and the air compressor chugged. A regular. And if something happened out there on Highway 68, eye-God, he was there to see it.

BAG OF BONDS

And Mr. Dwyer, in a circular letter to the other judges, "no more manuscripts, only reports," and that the other salaries works in my mind, but none there is a point of view, by that, I mean with regard to his case, which I have not yet known his way back to a new one. The same of it, perhaps, a friend's tale would be, so to speak, a heart, and I have bent knee.

'Do you hear a lot, old timer?' I asked

On Ayuh he said: His lips—dark as strips of burnt fat—
green. His gums swarmed with white patches. The white of his
teeth still painted in the tongue, and he spoke in a hoarse, guttural
'And she gut that little one—cunnin, she as! Ayuh!'

"Cunnin as a cat a runnin," I agreed.

He balked at me a little surprised to hear such an old "beaut" with a presumably new-fangled mouth, and then that surprise was altogether waned. "Her don't mind her rough," he said. "Baby in the rear of the place, don'tcha know."

I became aware—better aware, I think—of the half a dozen people were watching and listening to us. That was not my impression, I said, raising my voice a bit. No, that was not my impression at all.

He only grinned . . . that old man's grin that says *Oh, ayuh, Leah; I know one worth two of that*

I left the store feeling worried for Matt. Dave and his wife were minding her business, it seemed to me.

When I got home, I took my bath and went to the kitchen. It was dark. I went to get the bread, eggs, and a tin of milk. I saw that the fridge door, then placed. Perhaps a small child had been playing. Papers had been scattered randomly across the floor. As I was taking paste, letters and numbers even *ganes* were on the floor. Letters, kaishis, but they weren't random at all. Next to the tin of milk on the front of the refrigerator. So did not all letters were. So did not come in and . . .

Rearranged the magnets on the tracks to save a few seconds. It was needed to do some heavy remedial work. I took a couple of 1000 ft. with just the tip of my finger. Then saw that the car was close to

reached out and spread them again, doing it with enough force to knock a couple to the floor. I didn't pick them up.

That night, before going to bed, I placed the Memo-Scriber on the table beneath Bunter the Great Stuffed Moose, turning it on and putting it on the DETAILED mode. Then I slipped in one of my old home-dubbed cassettes, zeroed the counter, and went to bed, where I slept without dreams or other interruption for eight hours.

The next morning, Monday, was the sort of day the tourists come to Maine for—the air so sunny clear that the hills across the lake seemed to be under subtle magnification. Mount Washington, New England's highest, floated in the farthest distance.

I put on the coffee, then went into the living room, whistling. All my naggings of the last few days seemed silly this morning. Then the whistle died away. The Memo-Scriber's counter, set to 000 when I went to bed, was now at 012.

I rewound it, hesitated with my finger over the PLAY button, told myself (in Jo's voice) not to be a fool, and pushed it.

"*Oh Mike*," a voice whispered, moaned, almost on the tape, and I found myself having to press the heel of one hand to my mouth to hold back a scream. It was what I had heard in Jo's office when the draft rushed past the sides of my face—only now the words were slowed down just enough for me to understand them. "*Oh Mike*," it said again. There was a faint click. The machine had shut down for some length of time. And then, once more, spoken in the living room as I had slept in the north wing: "*Oh Mike*."

Then it was gone.

Good to see you, too," I said, grinning. Nor was it a false grin. I felt a fright. Things with the power to scare the living shut out of you on a thannery midnigh in most cases seem only interesting in the bright light of a summer morning. "You're looking well, my friend."

It was true. Bill was four years older and a little grayer around the edges, but otherwise the same. Sixty-five? Seventy? It didn't matter. There was no waxy look of ill health about him, and none of the falling away in the face, principally around the eyes and in the cheeks, that I associate with encroaching infirmity.

"So, you," he said, letting go of my hand. "We was all v'sorry about Jo. Mike. Fucks in town taogat the word of her. It was a shock, with her so young. My wife asked if I'd give you her condolences special. Jo made her an atagan the year she had the pneumonia, and Yvette ain't never forgot it."

"Thanks," I said, and my voice wasn't quite my own for a moment or two. It seemed that on the TR my wife was hardly dead at all. And thank Yvette, too."

"Yah. Everything okay with the acuser? Other'n the air conditioner, I mean. Baggardly thing. Them at the Western Auto promised me that part last week, and now they're saying maybe not until August first."

"It's okay. I've got my PowerBook. If I want to use it, the kitchen table will do fine for a desk. And I *ain't* want to use it—so many cross words, so little time."

"Got your hot water okay?"

"All that's fine, but there is one problem."

I stoppe. How did you tell your caretaker you thought your house was haunted? Probably, there was no good way—probably the best thing to do was to go at it head on. I had questions, but I didn't want just to nibble around the edges of the subject and be coy. For one thing, Bill would sense it. He might have bought his false teeth out of a catalogue, but he wasn't stupid.

"What's on your mind, Mike? Shoot."

"I don't know how you're going to take this, but—"

He smiled in the way of a man who suddenly understands and held up his hand. "Guess maybe I know already."

BAG OF BONES

“You can’t tell the difference between a lie and a truth,” he said. “I don’t know what he really experienced. So I put myself in his shoes. I don’t like football, so I’m going to tell you what I think he saw.” “What did *you* hear?”

Mostly what Royce Merritt and Derek Brooks have to tell him is that Boynton had to find out how much Merritt had to say. A little, remember. Only a little back last night after a solid day's work. 'So it's the big topic down to the store.'

I had not even dreamed of seeing Sarah Webster Fernald, so what he was talking about. All I could think was that they were talking about the strange noises in the house. Then the rain came. Marjorie looked and everything else faded with it. Marjorie was now the girl's sum with the gold-headed cane and the sailor was with O. Her father. My caretaker wasn't talking about ghostly noises. He was talking about Marjorie Devore.

‘Let’s get you accepted into the United Nations, and then we’ll be stepping in here.’

When we were seated on the deck, me with fresh orange and Brad with a cup of tea. Coffee burns me at both in this case. I said, "I see you first to tell me the Royal Marine Desertion version of your encounter with Mattie and Kyra."

It turned out to be better than I had expected. But when I was standing at the side of the road with the three men in cars and a truck and observed my Chevy submerge into the Tech where the driver's side door open but apparently not that of the back door. Using the white street Route 66 as a guidepost. As to the site of this, however, Roy claimed that Martin La... and a kiss on the mouth.

“Do we get the partial sat below, or do we get the associated ship, or her some tongue?” I asked.

Bill gets into Reeves' imagination and sees a world that is strange. 'It was fifty or so, and that was forty or more year ago.'

However, because the W is not a constant, it is not clear that the lack of physical weight sharing does not carry over to the system as a whole.

had been inadvertent—whatever the young lady herself might think about it.

"Shite, you don't need to tell me that," he said. "But . . ."

He said that *out* the way my mother always had, letting it trail off on its own, like the tail of some ill-omened kite.

"But what?"

You'd do well to keep your distance from her," he said. "She's nice enough—I'm ist a town girl, don't you know—but she's trouble." He paused. "No, that ain't quite fair to her. She's *in* trouble."

"The old man wants custody of the baby doesn't he?"

Bill set his teacup down on the deck rail and looked at me with his eyebrows raised. Reflections from the lake ran up his cheek in ripples giving him an exotic look. "How'd you know?"

Guesswork, out of the educated variety. Her father-in-law called me Saturday night during the fireworks. And while he never came right out and stated his purpose, I doubt if Max Devore came all the way back to TR 50 in western Maine to reproach his daughter-in-law's Jeep and trailer. So what's the story, Bill?

For several moments he only looked at me. It was almost the look of a man who knows you have contracted a serious disease and isn't sure how much he ought to tell you. Being looked at that way made me profoundly uneasy. It also made me feel that I might be putting Bill Dean on the spot. Devore had roots here, after all. And as much as Bill might like me, I didn't. Je and I were from away. It could have been worse—it could have been Massachusetts or New York—but Derry, although in Maine, was still away.

Bill told me to use a little wigwagational help if you

"You want to stay out of his way," he said. His easy smile was gone. "The man's mad."

For a moment I thought Bill, or my meant Devore was pissed off at me, and then I took another look at his face. No, I decided, he didn't mean pissed off, he had used the word "mad" in the most literal way.

"Mad now?" I asked. "Mad like Charles Manson? Like Hannibal Lecter? How?"

Say like Howard Hagues," he said. "Ever read any of the stories

RAG OF BONDS

[illegible]

My own dad at 14 once realized that if he saw a car, Max Devine would take into Scott Leff's best truck and new wheels. So he wanted the Flexible Flyer. Scott gave his dad \$500 for Christmas. Back around 1923, this would have been heaven, car both in the south and in the north. Dad said, but he got the sled. They both went in the year 1923, down Sugar Maple Hill, holding hands up the hill and when they were down, he'd hold all over his mittens and his snowsuit. Then, so the other car is yet, hear about Max Devine as a kid. I've seen a picture of the different ones, and some may even be true. That one, no, it's not true, though I do get the farm, not because of the other belief, but against his religion."

"Baptist?"

"Nosir, Yankee."

1928 was many moons ago. But I suspect most people will

‘Ayah, but mostly they don’t. I have it signed Devon since he came back and moved into Warrington’s, so I can’t say for sure, but I’ve heard things that make me think that if he’s a high-gear pilot for the war, he wouldn’t come all the way across the country to see his mother-in-law. He wants the *fast*. To him she’s just another person on the Staff for the new Flexible Flyer. And my strength is that I’ve a strong belief that where the window-glass between him and her

I slipped my mitt and looked out at the sea. Bill gave me time to think, scraping one of his workboots across the floor. I am not one to beards while I do it. (Crowsht, I reckoned, I'd be swaying as a few and exuberant splatters.

One thing seemed absolutely sure: Muriel Dwyer was not going to let the rules up Salt Creek with the patients. I don't think that I was at all certain of this, myself, but I wasn't having any sleep, so I decided to go out and see what the law would protect Mrs. Dwyer against. Mr. C. G. Smith, who

Mr. Computer decided to play dirty. As a boy he'd taken the sled he wanted and gone sliding by himself at midnight, bleeding hands not a concern. And as a man? An old man who had been getting every sled he wanted for the last forty years or so?

"What's the story with Mattie, Bill? Tell me."

It didn't take him long. Country stories are, by and large, simple stories. Which isn't to say they're not often interesting.

Mattie Devore had started life as Mattie Stanchfield, not quite from the TR out from just over the line in Motton. Her father had been a logger, her mother a home beautician (which made it, in a gnastly way, the perfect country marriage). There were three kids. When Dave Stanchfield missed a curve over in Lovell and drove a fully loaded pulptruck into Kowadin Pond, his widow—kinda lost heart, 'as they say. She died soon after. There had been no insurance, other than what Stanchfield had been obliged to carry on his Jimmy and his skidder.

Talk about your Brothers Grimm, huh? Subtract the Fisher-Price toys behind the house, the two pole hair dryers in the basement beauty salon, the old rustbucket Toyota in the driveway, and you were right there. *Once upon a time there lived a poor old man and his three children.*

Mattie is the princess of the piece—poor but beautiful that she *was* beautiful (I could personally testify). Now enter the prince. In this case a gangly stuttering redhead named Lance Devore. The child of Max Devore's sunset years. When Lance met Mattie he was twenty-one. She had just turned seventeen. The meeting took place at Warrington's, where Mattie had landed a summer job as a waitress.

Lance Devore was staying across the lake on the Upper Bay, but on Tuesday nights there were pickup softball games at Warrington's, the townies against the summer folks—and he usually came across to play. Softball is a great thing for the Lance Devores of the world: when you're standing at the plate with a bat in your hands, it doesn't matter if you're gangly. And it sure doesn't matter if you stutter.

He confused em quite considerable over to Warrington's. Bill said, "They didn't know which team he belonged on—the Locals or the Aways. Lance didn't care, either side was fine with him. Some weeks

need play for one's money, but that I'm not going to let it happen to me. As he said that, I noticed some of the other players in the crowd start to whisper. I knew what they were saying. At second's start of my life, I was told that I was a gay Noriega."

"You might mean Nureyev," I said.

He shrugged. "But it is a well-known fact. As I told you. He fits it. It's mostly young folks that play, and know what he is, how you do, not who you are. Besides, I bet you can't know Max Devore from a hole in the ground."

"Unless they read the *Life*, *Time*, *Fortune*, and the computer magazines," I said. "In those you run across the name Devore about as often as you run across the name of God in the Bible."

"No foolin'?"

"Well, I guess that in the computer magazines God is at least spelled Gates, but you know what I mean."

"I s'pose. But even so, it's been sixty-five years since Max Devore spent any real time on the TR. You know what happened with that, don't you?"

"No, why would I?"

He looked at me, surprised. Then a slow smile spread over his eyes. He blinked and it cleared. "Tell you another thing, that's not a secret—but I need to be over to the Harmonias to check out that sump pump. Don't want to get sick trucked. Put it wise to me, look is just this. Lance Devore was accepted as a nice young fellow who let a softball three hundred and fifty feet into the trees. He struck it just right. There was no one old enough to deal him a ball against him—not at Warrington's on Tuesday nights, there was a lot of money bet against him that his family had dough—there. Hell, there are lots of wealthy people here in the summer. You know that. None would be much as Max Devore, but he's rich as a million dollars."

That wasn't true, and I had just enough money to know it. Warrington's like the Richter scale—once you pass a certain point, the jumps from one level to the next aren't double or triple but some are a very, very, rareous multiply you and then even want to check out the other. It was

straight it, although I guess he didn't believe his own insight: the very rain was different from my own and me. I thought of telling Bill that, and decided to keep my mouth shut. He had a sump-pump to fix.

Kyra's parents met over a keg of beer stacked in a mudhole. Mattie was running the usual Tuesday night keg out to the softball field from the main building on a handcart. She'd gotten it most of the way from the restaurant wing with no trouble, but there had been heavy rain earlier in the week, and the cart finally bogged down in a soft spot. Lance's team was up, and Lance was sitting at the end of the bench, waiting his turn to hit. He saw the girl in the white shorts and blue Warrington's polo shirt struggling with the bogged handcart, and got up to help her. Three weeks later they were inseparable and Mattie was pregnant; ten weeks later they were married; thirty-seven months later, Lance Devore was in a coffin, done with scurfball and cold beer on a summer evening, done with what he called "woodsing," done with fatherhood, done with love for the beautiful princess. Just another early funeral, hold the happy ever after.

Bill Dean didn't deserve the meeting in any detail, he only said, "They met at the field—she was running out the beer and he helped her out of a boghole when she got her handcart stuck."

Mattie never said much about that part of it, so I don't know much. Except I do—and although some of the details might be wrong, I do bet you a dollar to a hundred I got most of them right. That was my summer for knowing things I had no business knowing.

It's not, for one thing—'94 is the hottest summer of the decade and July is the hottest month of the summer. President Clinton is being upstaged by Newt and the Republicans. Folks are saying old Slick Wilbur may not even run for a second term. Boris Yeltsin is reputed to be either dying of heart disease or in a dry-cleaning clinic. The Red Sox are looking better than they have any right to. In Derry, Johanna Arden Noonan's maybe starting to feel a little wopsy in the morning. If so, she does not speak of it to her husband.

I see Mattie in her blue polo shirt with her name sewn in white script above her left breast. Her white shorts make a pleasing contrast to her tanned legs. I also see her wearing a blue gumme cap with the red W for

Warrington above the engine. Her pretty dark blond hair goes through the hood and back of the cap and falls to the collar. I see her trying to yank the handcart out of the mud with one arm and the keg of beer. Her head is down, the shadow thrown on the left side of the cap obscures all of her face but her mouth and chin are set in a

labored much-you-are-poor-Lance says, the sick joke. This is a life cast by the cap's bill. It flows away, it sees her, goes out, comes back, and pass on to their daughter. On a look into those eyes a little is cast out without a single shot fired, he belongs to that sister, as if a young man ever belonged to any young woman.

The rest, as they say around here, was just courtin'.

The old man had three children, but Lance was the only one he seemed to care about. "Daughter's crazy or in a smithy case in case," he said matter-of-factly. In some laugh-in academy in California, I think, heard she caught her a cancer, too. The fact that Lance had no interest in computers and software actually seemed to please his father. He was another son who was capable of running the business. Lance, on the other hand, however, Lance Devore's elder half brother wasn't capable at all, there would be no grandchildren from that one.

Ramp-wrangler Bill said, "Understand, there's a lot of that going around out there in California."

There was a fair amount of it going around on the Elk too, I married but thought it not my place to offer sexual instruction to my co-ranger.

Lance Devore had been attending Reed College in Oregon, majoring in forestry—the kind of guy who falls in love with green flannel shirts, red suspenders, and the sight of condors at dawn. A brother's Grinnell woodcutter in fact, once you get it past the sex, drink, and sex, it's the same between his junior and senior years, his father, all summer, and then to the family compound in Palm Springs, all the papers, and then with the sex, lawyer's suitcase crammed with maps, aerial photos, and other papers. These had little order that Lance could see. Of course, he had a few. Imagine a comic book collector given a room full of comic books with the old copies of *Dan-Dee*. Imagine a movie collector given a room full of a never-released film starring Humphrey Bogart and Marlene Dietrich. Then imagine this as a young forester realizing that his father

owned not just a few or square miles in the vast unincorporated forests of western Maine, but entire *realms*.

Although Max Devore had left the TR in 1933, he'd kept a lively interest in the area where he'd grown up, subscribing to area newspapers and getting magazines such as *Down East* and the *Maine Times*. In the early eighties, he had begun to buy long columns of land just east of the Maine-New Hampshire border. God knew there had been plenty for sale—the paper companies which owned most of it had fallen into a recessionary pit, and many had become convinced that their New England millings and operations would be the best place to begin retrenching. So this land, stolen from the Indians and clear-cut ruthlessly in the twenties and fifties, came into Max Devore's hands. He might have bought it just because it was there, a good bargain he could afford to take advantage of. He might have bought it as a way of demonstrating to himself that he had really survived his childhood, had, in point of fact, triumphed over it.

Or he might have bought it as a gift for his beloved younger son. In the years when Devore was making his major land purchases in western Maine, Lance would have been just a kid—but old enough for a perceptive father to see where his interests were tending.

Devore asked Lance to spend the summer of 1994 surveying purchases which were, for the most part, already ten years old. He wanted the boy to put the paperwork in order, but he wanted more than that—he wanted Lance to make sense of it. It wasn't a land-use recommendation he was looking for, exactly, although I guess he would have listened if Lance had wanted to make one; he simply wanted a sense of what he had purchased. Would Lance take a summer in western Maine trying to find out what *his* sense of it was? At a salary of two or three thousand dollars a month?

Imagine Lance's reply was a more polite version of Buddy Jefferson's "Does a crow shit in the pine tops?"

The kid arrived in June of 1994 and set up shop in a tent on the far side of Dark Shore Lake. He was due back at Reed in late August. Instead, though, he decided to take a year's leave of absence. His father wasn't pleased. His father smelled what he called "girl trouble."

BAG OF BONES

"You put us a Linc on it, suit him. Call it the Milton Bill. Don't stand against the doctors, let it slip through with as few amendments as possible. He'll come home for Christmas, I'll see they do his sniffin' for him."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Bill, let Peppercorn be real, let it be real, will you be any more if they're paid?"

"People like Royce Merrill?"

Royce might be a little begrudged, but he wouldn't be the only. Times around here don't go between good and good, they're always day most, always between good and worse. So when a guy like Max Devore sends a guy out with a scoop of shit, an old man like Bill Hills

"Was it someone local? A lawyer?"

Not a lawyer, a real estate broker named Ronald Osgood, a greasy kind of fellow, was Bill Dean's judgment of him, who'd done as much business in Milton. Eventually Osgood secured a lawyer from Crested Rock. The greasy fellow's initial job when the summer of '54 ended at a Lancel Devore remained on the TR, was to find out what that fellow was going on and put a stop to it.

"And then?" I asked.

Bill glanced at his watch, glanced at the sky, then he turned his eyes on me. He gave a hurried shrug, as if to say, "We're not men of the word, I'm quiet and settle I sort of way, you don't need to ask such a question like that."

Then Lancel Devore and Mattie Stanchfield got married at the Grace Baptist Church right up there on Highway 68. There were tales that the town is about what Osgood might've done to keep it from coming off. I heard he even tried to bribe Reverend Crocker into refusing to perform, but I think that's stupid, they just would have given him peace. Besides, I don't see much sense in repeating what I don't know for sure.

Bill unlocked an arm and began to tick items off on the knuckles of his right hand.

They got married in the middle of September, '54. I know that. Our people had the thumbs. Peppercorn was in and with some ceremony, so if the groom's father would put in an appearance, our bet would be

Oat popped the forefinger. Added to the thumb, it made a pistol. "Mat the kid a baby in April of '75, making the kiddie a dight premature, but not enough to matter. I seen it in the store with my own eyes when it wasn't a week old, and it was just the right size." Oat with the second finger. "I don't know that Lance Devore's old man absolutely refused to help em financially, but I do know they were living in that trailer down below Dickie's Garage, and that makes me think they were havin' a pretty hard skate."

Devore put on the choke-chain. "I said, 'It's what a guy used to gettin' his own way would do...' but if he loved the boy the way you seem to think, he might have come around."

"Maybe, maybe not." He glanced at his watch again. "Let me finish up quick and get out of y'at sunshine..." but you ought to hear one more little story, because it really shows how the land lies."

In July of last year, less'n a month before he died, Lance Devore shows up at the post-office counter in the Lakeview General. He's got a manila envelope he wants to send, but first he needs to know Carla DeConce's what's inside. She said he was all stuffed out, like daddies sometimes get over their kids when they're small."

I nodded, amused at the idea of skinny, scattery Lance Devore all stuffed out. But I could see it in my mind's eye, and the image was also sort of sweet.

"It was a steady petcher they'd gotten taken over in the Rock. Sawed the kid... what's her name? Kayla?"

"Kyra."

"Ayuh, they call em a-yet-ning tase days. Con't they?" It showed Kyra sittin' in a big leather chair, with a pair of oak spectacles on her little snub of a nose. Lookin' at one of the aerial photos of the woods over across the lake in TR 100 or TR 1... part of what the old man had picked out anyway. Carla said the baby had a surprised look on her face, as if she hadn't suspected there could be so many woods in the whole world. Said it was *awful* cunnin', she did."

"Cunnin' as a cat a-runnin'." I murmured.

And the envelope, Registered Express Mail, was addressed to Maxwell Devore, in Palm Springs, California."

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Teaching you to declare that the old man either passed or not, or ask for a picture of his only grandchild, or that I am. I've never seen a picture *might* thaw him.

Bill nodded, looking as pleased as a parent whose child has managed a difficult sum. Don't know if it did. I said, "Was it a good thing to see one way or the other? Lance had bought one of those little red cashes like what you've got here. There was a bad storm the night before, a high wind blowed over along the lakeshore. I remember that. That was a ought-were evening. Lance put it out up in the attic. It's all done and set, except around the time the storm came on. I remembered he left his socket wrench on the trailer. It. He wanted to get it so it wouldn't get all wet n rusty—"

"He was struck by lightning? Jesus, Bill!"

Lightning struck, all right, but it hit across the way. You go past the place where Wasp Hill Reactions hit in '68 and you'll see the stump of a tree that strike knocked over. Lance was coming down the hill with his socket wrench when it hit. If you've never had a lightning bolt hit right over your head, you don't know how scary it is. It's like you've drunk driver veer across into your lane, headed right for you, and then swing back onto his own side just in time. Close lightning makes your hair stand up, makes your canned *pink* stand up. It's not to say the radio on your steel hills, it makes your ears hum, and it makes the air taste roasted. Lance fell off the ladder. It is hard time to think, certainly, before he hit the ground. I bet he thought he *could* recited Pater. He loved the TR, but it wasn't lucky for him."

"Broke his neck?"

Ay, n. With all the thunder, Mattie never heard that. He *passed* anything. She looked out a minute or two later when it started to rain, and he still wasn't in. And there he was, laying on the ground, and *passed* up into the friggin hail with his eyes open.

Bill looked at his watch, one o'clock time, then swung open the door to his truck. The old man would come for that would he not, come for his son's funeral and I suppose more exorcisms. He *could* want nawthin to do with the young woman—'

But he wants the kid. I saw it was no more than what a lady

knew, but I felt a sinking in the pit of my stomach—just the same. *Don't ask me what.* Mattie had asked me on the morning of the fourth *It's not a good idea for Klamath.* How far along in the process has he gotten?"

On the third turn and heading into the home stretch, I said, "I said, 'I'll be a brain in Castle County Superior Court—maybe later this month, maybe next.' The judge could rule then to hand the girl over, or put it off until fall. I don't think it matters when, because the one thing that's never going to happen on God's green earth is a brain in favor of the mother. One way or another, that little girl is going to grow up in California."

Put that way, it gave me a very nasty little chill.

Bill slid behind the wheel of his truck. "Stay out of it, Mike," he said. "Stay away from Mattie Devore and her daughter. And if you get called to court on account of seeing the two of 'em on Saturday, smile a lot and say as little as you can."

Max Devore's charging that she's unfit to raise the child.
"Ayuh."

"Bill, I *saw* the child, and she's fine."

He grinned again, but this time there was no amusement in it. "Magine she is. But that's not the point. Stay clear of their business, old boy. It's my job to tell you that, with Jo going. I guess I'm the only caretaker you got." He slammed the door of his Ram, started the engine, reached for the gearshift, then dropped his hand again as something else occurred to him. "If you get a chance, you ought to look for the owls."

"What owls?"

"There's a couple of plastic owls around here someplace. They might be in a basement or out in Jo's studio. They come in by night—order the fall before she passed on."

"The fall of 1993?"

"Ayuh."

That can't be right. We hadn't used Sara in the fall of 1993.

Yes, though. I was down here putting on the storm doors when Jo showed up. We had a s'matter, and then the UPS truck came. I lugged the box into the entry and had a coffee. I was still drinking it then—while she took the owls out of the cart on and showed 'em to me. "Gerry, out

BAG OF BONDS

the scheduled Shakti not necessarily a failure was, as the first round of analysis clearly demonstrated, very much a function of Derry's lack of delivery capability. It also shows, however,

"When in the fall was it, Bud? Do you remember?"

Second week of November, we said good-bye to the two carter types to Lewiston after that afternoon's Verisysters. It was a relief. On our way back we stopped at the Castle Rock Ag. Soc. to get our Thanksgiving turkeys. The women at the counter, "You really didn't know about them owls?"

"No."

"That's a touch peculiar, wouldn't you say?"

Maybe she told me and I forgot. I said, "I guess it doesn't matter much, in any case." Yet it seemed to matter. It was something. But it seemed to matter. Why would I want to say, at least, "let me begin with?"

To keep the crows from shitting up the woodwork, we tried to keep them away, but they see those plastic owls, they want it.

I burst out laughing in spite of my puzzlement at the reason for it. "Yeah? That really works?"

Ayan: "I hope you move em every now and then so the crows don't get suspicious. Crows are just about the smartest birds going around now. You look for those owls, save yourself a lot of mess."

I will. I said, Plastic wants to scare the crew away—it was exactly the sort of knowledge Jew would use. Evyone was like, *criss*, *criss*, *criss*—that way, picking up giddy pieces of information that responded to watch for interest, and let up, without bothering to learn. All at once I was lonely for her again, missing her as I had.

Good. Some day when I've got more time, we'll walk the deer run way out into Woods to see if you want. I think you'll be satisfied.

"I'm sure I will. Where's Devore staying?"

The bushy eyebrows went up. 'Washington? He is an American, not a local neighbor. I thought you must know.'

I remembered the woman I'd seen back last year sitting on the grass, shirtless and waving, trying to give her a cigarette. He'd been sitting there and nodded. 'I met his wife.'

Bill laughed heartily enough at that to feel in need of his handkerchief. He fished it off the dash board (a blue paisley thing the size of a football pennant) and wiped his eyes.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Skanky woman? White hair? Face sort of like a kid's Halloween mask?"

It was my turn to laugh. "That's her."

She ain't his wife, she's his whatdoyoucallit, personal assistant. Rogette Whitmore is her name. He pronounced it to GET, with a hard G. Devere's waves're all dead. The last one twenty years.

"What kind of name is Rogette? French?"

California. He said, and shrugged as if that one word explained everything. "There's people in town scared of her."

"Is that so?"

Ayer. Bill hesitated, then added with one of those smiles we put on when we want others to know that we know we're saying something silly. "Brenda Meserve says she's a witch."

And the two of them have been staying at Warrington's almost a year.

Ayer. The Whitmore woman comes n goes, but mostly she's been here. That's n in town is that they'll stay until the custody case is finished off, then all go back to California on Devere's private jet. Leave Osgood to sell Warrington's, and —

"Sell it? What do you mean, *sell* it?"

I thought you must know. Bill said, dropping his gearshift into Drive. When old Hagar Emerson told Devere they closed the lodge after Thanksgiving, Devere told him he had no intention of moving. Said he was comfortable right where he was and meant to stay put.

He bought the place. I had been by turns surprised, amused, and angered over the last twenty minutes, but never exactly disabused. Now I was. He bought Warrington's Lodge so he wouldn't have to move to Lookout Rock Hotel over in Castle View or rent a house.

Ayer, so he did. Nine buildings, including the main lodge and The Sunset Bar, twelve acres of woods, a six-hole golf course, and five hundred feet of shoreline on Elm Street. Plus a two-lane bowling alley and a

could take. For an hour and a half a million dollars' worth of money and Devo's paid with a personal check. I wonder how it feels to have all those zeros. See you, Mike.'

With that he ducked up the driveway, leaving me to stare after him, stoop, looking after him with my mouth open.

Plastic owls.

Bill had told me roughly two dozen interesting things in between peeks at his watch, but the one which stayed in my head the longest was the fact and I did accept it: a fact he had been responsible for me to know that Jon had come down here to take delivery of a couple of plastic garden dam owls.

Had she told me?

She might have. I didn't remember her doing so, but it seemed to me that I would have, but Jon used to assure that while I got in the zone it was no good to tell me anything: stuff went in one ear and out the other. Sometimes she'd pin little notes—errands to run, clothes to make, or my shirt—as if I were a first-grader. But wouldn't I recall if she'd said I was going down to Sara's? UPS is delivering something, I want to see if I'm personally interested in keeping a day company. Hell, who cares? I mean, I always liked an excuse to go to the TR. I suspect I've been working on that screenplay—and maybe pushing it a little—notes pinned to the sleeve of my shirt. *If I go out to the car, I'll get some fresh orange juice...*

I inspected what little was left of Jon's vegetable garden, with the Jon sun beating down on my neck and thought about why the plastic garden dam was. Suppose Jon had told me he was coming down here to Sara. Laughs? Suppose I had declined almost without entering the letter because I was in the writing zone? Even if you granted those things, there was another question: why had she felt the need to send down a personal message when she could have just called someone, or I asked them to put it on the delivery track? Kenny Aaster would have been happy to do it for me. Or M. M. And Bill Dean, our caretaker, had actual experience. This is another question: one was why she hadn't used that UPS delivery the dam was things to Derry—and finally I decided I should take some of

actually seeing a bona fide plastic owl for myself. Maybe, I thought, going back to the house, I'd put one on the roof of my Chevy when it was parked in the driveway. Forestall future bombing runs.

I paused in the entry, struck by a sudden idea, and called Ward Hanks, the guy in Waterville who handles my taxes and my few non-writing-related business affairs.

Mike," he said heartily. "How's the lake?"

The lake's cool and the weather's hot, just the way we like it. I said, "Ward, you keep all the records we send you for five years, don't you? Just in case IRS decides to give us some grief?"

Tax is accepted practice," he said, "but I hold your stuff for seven or ten years. Of the tax boys, you're a mighty fat pigeon."

Better a fat pigeon than a put-the-owl. I thought but didn't say. What I said was, "That includes desk calendars, right? Mine and Jo's up until she died?"

You bet. Since neither of you kept diaries—it was the best way to cross-reference receipts and claimed expenses with—

Could you find Jo's desk calendar for 1993 and see what she had going in the second week of November?"

I'd be happy to. What in particular are you looking for?

For a moment I saw myself sitting at my kitchen table in Derry on my first night as a widower, holding up a box with the words *Norco Home Pregnancy Test* printed on the side. Exactly what *was* I looking for at this late date? Considering that I had loved the lady and she was almost four years in her grave, what *was* I looking for? Besides trouble, that was.

I'm looking for two plastic owls," I said. Ward probably thought I was talking to him, but I'm not sure I was. "I know that sounds weird, but it's what I'm doing. Can you call me back?"

"Within the hour."

"Good man," I said, and hung up.

Now for the actual owls themselves. Where was the most likely spot to store two such interesting artifacts?

My eyes went to the cellar door. Elementary, my dear Watson.

+ + +

my body seemed to come unwound. My hair stood up. My eyesockets seemed to be expanding and my eyeballs contracting, as if my head were trying to turn into a skull. Every inch of my skin broke out in goose-flesh. Something was in here with me. Very likely something dead. I could no longer have turned on the light if I'd wanted to. I no longer had the strength to raise my arm.

I tried to talk, and at last, in a husky whisper I hardly recognized, I said, "Are you really there?"

Thud.

Who are you? I could still do no better than that husky whisper, the voice of a man giving last instructions to his family as he lies on his deathbed. This time there was nothing from below.

I tried to think, and what came to my straggling mind was Tony Curtis as Harry Headlin in some old movie. According to the film, Headlin had been the Dogenes of the Omega board circuit, a guy who spent his spare time just looking for an honest medium. He'd attended one seance where the dead communicated by—

Tap once for yes, twice for no. I said, "Can you do that?"

Thud.

It was on the stairs below me—but not *too* far below. Five steps down, six or seven at most. Not quite close enough to touch if I should reach out and wave my hand in the black basement air—a thing I could imagine, but not actually imagine doing.

Are you? My voice trailed off. There was simply no strength in my diaphragm. Chilly air lay on my chest like a flatiron. I gathered all my will and tried again. "Are you Jo?"

I could. That soft fist on the insulation. A pause, and then *I could thud.* Yes and no.

Then, with no idea why I was asking such an insane question, "Are the owls down here?"

Thud-thud.

"Do you know where they are?"

Thud.

"Should I look for them?"

Thud! Very hard.

There was a faint glow of light from the window, the way to an—

It rang as though I were calling I don't know what it was, but it was sweet. I raised my left hand to my head, and with the other I went to my back to the door. There was light as I stepped out. I was all but bathing in my own sweat.

"Are you Lance Devore?"

Thud-thud, at once.

"Is it safe for me at Sara? Am I safe?"

There. A pause. And *There* it was again, so that time it was the stairs wasn't this time. *There.* *There.* Yes. I was safe. No. I was safe.

I had regained my bearings and I was in. I reached for it. It clicked. The wall had found the light switch. I settled my fingers on it. No. The sweat on my face felt as if it were turning to ice.

"Are you the person who cries in the night?" I asked.

Thud-thud from below me, and between the wall studs I reached the switch. The ceiling lights came on. So did the brilliant orange glow, at least a hundred and twenty-five watts—over the dining. There was time for anyone to feel let down, get away and come back to rest. After Mrs. Meserve—admirable in so many ways—had gone to sweep the cellar stairs. When I went down to where I stood—the meddling sounds had been coming from. I felt tracks in the carpet. But mine were the only ones.

I blew out breath in front of me and could sweat. So it was possible to be cold—but it was warm again so fast. I blew out another breath and could see just a hint of fog. A third breath and I was ready to go.

I ran my palm over one of the insulated squares. Smooth. I pushed my finger at it, and at once I didn't push with my finger. It was like a hot cup in the silvery surface. Easy as one of some new secret of making a fist down here, this stuff should be perfect. The man was making perhaps even broken to reveal the pocket and reach it. But the squares were smooth.

"Are you still there?" I asked.

No response, and yet I had a sense that my voice was still there. Somewhere.

I hope I didn't offend you by turning on the light,' I said, and now I did feel slightly odd, standing on my cellar stairs and talking out loud, serenading the spiders. I wanted to see you if I could. I had no idea if that was true or not.

Suddenly—so suddenly I almost lost my balance and tumbled down the stairs—I watched around, convinced the shroud-creature was behind me, that it had been the thing knocking it, no polite M. R. James ghost but a horror from around the rim of the universe.

There was nothing.

I turned around again, took two or three deep, steadying breaths, and then went the rest of the way down the cellar stairs. Beneath them was a perfectly serviceable canoe, complete with paddle. In the corner was the gas stove we'd replaced after buying the place, also the claw-foot tub Jo had wanted (over my objections) to turn into a planter. I found a trunk filled with vaguely recalled table-linen, a box of mildewy cassette tapes (groups like the Deltones, Funkadelic, and 58 Special), several cartons of old dishes. There was a life down here, but ultimately not a very interesting one. Unlike the life I'd sensed in Jo's studio, this one hadn't been cut short but evolved out of, shed like old skin, and that was what it was, in fact, the natural order of things.

There was a photo album on a shelf of knickknacks and I took it down, both curious and wary. No bombshells this time, however, nearly all the pics were landscape shots of Sara Laughs as it had been when we bought it. I found a picture of Jo in bel bottoms (thought her hair parted in the middle and white lipstick on her mouth), and one of Michael Newman wearing a flowered shirt and matronly sideburns that made me cringe (the coachman Mike in the photo was a Barry White kind of guy I didn't want to recognize and yet did).

I found Jo's old broken treadmill, a rake I'd want if I was still around here come fall, a snowower I'd want even more if I was around come winter, and several cans of paint. What I didn't find was any plastic bowls. My insatiable thumping friend had been right.

Upstairs the telephone started ringing.

I hurried to answer it, going out through the cedar door and *back* reaching back in to flick off the lightswitch. This amazed me, and at the c

BAG OF BONDS

same time seemed like perfectly normal behavior. I was not at all not to step on his awkward cracks but seemed to put up with his behavior to me when I was kid. And even if it was a little weird, it didn't matter. I'd only been back at S-K for three days, but already I was relating Norman's First Law of Eccentricity, which says that "all weird strange behavior really doesn't seem strange at all."

I snagged the cordless. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mike. It's Ward."

"That was quick."

The file rooms just a short walk down my hall. I said, "Easy as pie. There's only one thing on Jo's calendar for the second week of November in 1975. It says S-Ks of Maine. Freeport. Maine. That's on Tuesday the sixteenth. Does it help?"

"Yes," I said. "Thank you, Ward. It helps a lot."

I broke the connection and put the phone back in its cradle. Yes, it helped. S-Ks of Maine was Soup Kitchens of Maine. I had been on their board of directors from 1972 until her death. Freeport was Freeport. It must have been a board meeting. They had probably discussed plans for feeding the homeless on Thanksgiving—and they'd also drawn the seventy or so miles to the TR in order to take delivery of two last loads. It didn't answer all the questions, but aren't there always questions in the wake of a loved one's death? And no strange demonstrations when they come up.

The UTO voice spoke up then. *Ward, I've got the information that says that the Board Meeting of S-Ks of Maine was on*

Jo had been on four different boards during the nineties, all of them doing charitable work. Her friend, Bonnie had persuaded her onto the Soup Kitchens board when I sent tell valiant. They had come to most of the meetings together. Not the one in November of 1975, presumably, and Bonnie could hardly be expected to remember that one particular meeting almost five years later—but if she saved her excitement for the meeting sheets...

Exactly what the fuck was I thinking? Calling Bonnie, making sure, then asking her to check her December 1975 minutes. Was going to ask her if the attendance report Iacino was absent from the

Newbler meeting? Was I going to ask if maybe Jo had seemed different that last year of her life? And when Bonnie asked me why I wanted to know, what would I say?

Get on her. Jo had snarled in my dream of her. In the dream she hadn't looked like Jonathan, she'd looked like some other woman, maybe like the one in the Book of Proverbs—the strange woman whose lips were as honey, but whose heart was full of gall and wormwood. A strange woman with fingers as cold as twigs after a frost. *Get on her, it's my last wish.*

I went to the cellar door and touched the knob. I turned it—then let it go. I didn't want to look down there into the dark, didn't want to risk the chance that something might start thumping again. It was better to leave that door shut. What I wanted was something cold to drink. I went to the kitchen, reached for the fridge door, then stopped. The magnets were back in a circle again—but this time four letters and one number had been pulled into the center and lined up there. They spelled a single lower-case word.

hello

There was something here. Even back in broad daylight I had no doubt of that. I asked if it was safe for me to be here and had received a mixed message—but that didn't matter. If I left Sara now, there was nowhere to go. I had a key to the house in Derry, but matters had to be resolved here. I knew that, too.

"Hello," I said, and opened the fridge to get a soda. "Whoever or whatever you are, hello."

CHAPTER

11

I woke in the early hours of the following morning convinced that there was someone in the north bedroom with me. I sat up against the pillows, rubbed my eyes, and saw a dark shadowy shape standing between me and the window.

"Who are you?" I asked, thinking that it would not reply in words, it would instead thump on the wall. Once for yes, twice for no—what's on your mind? He said no. But the figure standing over me would not reply at all. I groped up, found the string hanging from the ceiling over the bed, and yanked it. My mouth was torn open, now I could see my mouth contracted so tight it felt as if insects would move in and out.

"Oh shit," I said. "Fuck me til I cry."

Dangling from a hanger I'd hooked over the curtain rod was my old suede jacket. I'd parked it there while unpacking it. I'd then forgotten to stick it away in the closet. I tried to laugh and succeed. At first, in the morning it just didn't seem that funny.

I turned off the light and lay back down with my eyes open, waiting for Banta's door to ring or the childish song to start. I was still listening when I fell asleep.

Nesta hours or so later, as I was getting ready to go out to Jo's studio and see if the plastic owls were in the storage area where I hadn't checked the day before, a late-model Ford rolled down my driveway and stopped nose to nose with my Chevy. I had gotten as far as the short path between the house and the studio, but now I came back. The day was hot and breathless, and I was wearing nothing but a pair of cut-off jeans and plastic flip-flops on my feet.

Jo always claimed that the Cleveland style of dressing divided itself naturally into two subgenres: Full Cleveland and Cleveland Casual. My visitor that Tuesday morning was wearing Cleveland Casual—you had your Hawaiian shirt with pineapples and monkeys, your tan slacks from Banana Republic, your white loafers. Socks are optional, but white footgear is a necessary part of the Cleveland look, as is at least one piece of gaudy gold jewelry. This fellow was totally okay in the latter department: he had a Rolex on one wrist and a gold link chain around his neck. The tail of his shirt was out, and there was a suspicious lump at the back. It was either a gun or a deeper and looked too big to be a deeper. I glanced at the car again. Blackwall tires. And on the dashboard, oh look at this, a covered blue bubble. The better to creep up on you unsuspected. Grammar.

"Michael. Not a bit." He was handsome in a way that would be attractive to certain women—the kind who cringe when anybody in their immediate vicinity raises his voice, the kind who rarely call the police when things go wrong at home because, on some miserable secret level, they believe they deserve things to go wrong at home. Wrong things that result in black eyes, dislocated elbows, the occasional cigarette burn on the body. These are women who more often than not call their husbands or lovers daddy, as in "Can I bring you a beer, daddy?" or "Did you have a hard day at work, daddy?"

"Yes, I'm Michael Noonan. How can I help you?"

This version of daddy turned silent and grabbed something from the litter of paperwork on the passenger side of the front seat. Beneath the dash, a two-way radio scawked once, briefly and felicitant. He turned back to me with a long, batt-scoured folder in one hand. Held it out. "This is yours."

BAG OF BONES

When I at last took it to rest up, I threw it all together and put it on top of my palms which were already pressed flat by the weight of the bag. A kind of reflex. Instead I raised it and I'm still shaking it. I had just told me to put em up, Muggsy.

He looked at me patiently, his face as fresh as the Arizona dirt, then with that Arizonan look of kindness, open to his own curiosity. What was there in place of those things was a series of stories, a series of events that I had seen all of the world's possible behavior, most of it twice. One of his eyebrows had been split open a long time ago, and his cheeks had a faint red, discolored look that indicated that he had been a part of a lot of interesting in grain-alcohol products. He looked at me and he looked into the gutter and then he turned to keep my friends. I thought, daddy, get off me, don't be mean.

"Don't make this tough. You're gonna take service, this and we both know it, so don't make this tough."

"Show me some ID first."

He signed, rolled his eyes, then reached into one of his shirt pockets. He brought out a leather folder and flipped it open. There was a card and a photo ID. My new friend was George Herman, Deputy Sheriff, Castle County. The photo was flat and snappy, like something an assault victim would see in a mugbook.

"Okay?" he asked.

I took the buff-backed document when he held it out again. He stood there, broadcasting that sense of care that was one of his. I knew he had been subpoenaed to appear in the Castle County Court, Elmer Dargen, Attorney-at-Law, at ten o'clock in the morning of July 1st.

Today, in other words. Said Elmer Dargen had been appointed to appear and *advocate* Kyra Elizabeth Devore, a minor child. He would take a deposition from me concerning any knowledge I might have of Kyra Elizabeth Devore in regard to her wedding. This deposition would be taken on behalf of Castle County Superior Court and Judge Newcomb. A stenographer would be present. I was assured that this was the court's deposit and nothing to do with either Plaintiff or Defendant.

George said, "It's my job to regard each of the parties as a stick figure that can fail."

Thanks, but let's just assume you told me all about those, okay? I'll be there. I made shooing gestures at his car. I felt deeply disgusted and I felt *trafficked with*. I had never been served with a process before, and I didn't care for it.

He went back to his car, started to swing in, then stopped with one hairy arm hung over the top of the open door. His Rolex glared in the hazy sunlight.

Let me give you a piece of advice," he said, and that was enough to tell me anything else I needed to know about the guy. "Don't fuck with Mr. Devore."

"Or he'll squash me like a bug," I said.

"Huh?"

Your actual lines are: Let me give you a piece of advice—don't fuck with Mr. Devore or he'll squash you like a bug."

I could see by his expression—half past perplexed, going on angry—that he had meant to say something very much like that. Obviously we'd seen the same movies, including all those in which Robert De Niro plays a psycho. Then his face cleared.

"Oh sure, you're the writer," he said.

"That's what they tell me."

"You can say stuff like that 'cause you're a writer."

"Well, it's a free country, isn't it?"

"Ain't you a smartass, now?"

How long have you been working for Max Devore, Deputy? And does the County Sheriff's office know you're moonlighting?

They know. It's not a problem. You're the one that might have the problem, Mr. Smartass Writer."

I decided it was time to quit this before we descended to the kaka poopie stage of name-calling.

Get out of my driveway, please, Deputy."

He looked at me a moment longer, obviously searching for that perfect copper line and not finding it. He needed a Mr. Smartass Writer to help him, that was all. "I'll be looking for you on Friday," he said.

Does that mean you're going to buy me lunch? Don't worry. I'm a fairly cheap date."

BAG OF BONES

His readiness to let down his degree rather than let his pants for they were going to look like when he was sixty, it was the first time I saw him sweat. He got back to his Ford and drove to my driveway loud enough to make his tires creak. I stood with my hands waiting him go. Once he was headed back out there, I drove out onto the highway I went into the house. It occurred to me that despite the man's extra carried around last pay week, he was a little bit off. On the other hand, maybe it was a knockout.

A woman, Maria, Jos's voice advised, *I can't tell you anything, I'm waiting anything in front of you, so just settle—*

I shut her voice out. I didn't want to settle down. I was not settling up, I had been *interfered with*.

I walked over to the metal desk where I found I had always kept my pending documents and sat down. I felt now that I had a right to it, and tacked the summons to the bulletin board by one of the two half-covered jackets. With that much accomplishment, I raised my fist in front of my eyes, looked at the wedding ring on my finger, and then slammed it against the wall beside the desk. I did it hard enough to make an entire row of paperbacks jump. I thought about Maria Devore's baggy shorts and Kim's smock, then about a father's law paying boat and a quarter million dollars for Warrington's. Writing personal goddamned checks. I thought about B I D was a line that on way or another that little girl was going to grow up in California.

I walked back and forth through the house, still simmering, not finally cooled up in front of the fridge. The cereal's packaging was the same, but the letters inside had changed. I stared at it.

hel1o

they now read

help r

He per? I said, and as soon as I heard the word, it was understood. The letters on the fridge consisted of the simple alphabet.

not even that, I saw *h* and *v* had been lost someplace, and I'd have to get more. If the front of my Kenmore was going to become a Ouija board, I'd need a good supply of letters. Especially vowels. In the mean time, I moved the *n* and the *e* in front of the *r*. Now the message read

lp her

I scattered the circle of fruit and vegetable magnets with my palm, spread the letters, and resumed pacing. I had made a decision not to get between Devore and his daughter-in-law, but I'd wound up between them anyway. A deputy in Cleveland clothing had shown up in my driveway, complicating a life that already had its problems — and scaring me a little in the bargain. But at least it was a fear of something I could see and understand. All at once I decided I wanted to do more with the summer than worry about guests, crying kids, and what my wife had been up to that or five years ago — it in fact she had been up to anything. I couldn't write books, but that didn't mean I had to pick scabs.

Help her.

I decided I would at least try

'Harold Oblowski Literary Agency.'

'Come to Belize with me, Nola,' I said. 'I need you. We'll make beautiful love at midnight, when the full moon turns the ocean to a bone.'

'Hello, Mr. Norman,' she said. 'No sense of humor and Nola. No sense of romance, either. In some ways that made her perfect for the Oblowski Agency. Would you like to speak to Harold?'

'If he's in.'

'He is. Please hold.'

One nice thing about being a bestselling author — even one whose books only appear as a general rule on lists that go to fifteen — is that your agent almost always happens to be in. Another is if he's vacationing on Nantucket, he'll be in to you there. A third is that the time you spend on hold is usually quite short.

'Mike!' he cried. 'How's the lake? I thought about you all weekend!'

Yeah, I thought, and pigs will whistle.

James and the occasional but shrewd company of other men. I don't
 to take a lawyer, though I still consider Judge Wetherill a first-class
 recommendation, but even I decided I wanted someone who was more
 highly powered than W. C. I was likely to know. Some of the other
 and a taste for human flesh would be nice."

"Just the Harb didn't bother with the long way to try. What's
 up, Mike? Are you in trouble?"

Thump one for yes, twice for no, I thought, and for one wild moment
 thought of actually doing just that. I remembered this from C. S. Lewis
 Brown's memoir *Downfall Is Down* and wondered what it was like
 like to write an entire book with the pen of someone who was
 your left foot. Now I wondered what it would be like to go through
 eternity with no way to communicate but tapping out the letters
 And even then only a certain people would be able to read it. I don't
 stand you—and only those certain people at certain times.

Ja, was it you? And if it was, why did you answer both ways?

"Mike? Are you there?"

Yes. This isn't really my trouble. Harb did so only at first. I'm
 a problem, though. Your man gay is God here, right?

"Right. I'll call him right aw—"

but he deals primarily with contracts, law. I was thinking of a bond
 now and when I passed Harb did not notice. So it is a yes. I
 right gay. Most times, really. Call him for me, my very good friend.
 him I need to talk to an attorney with a good law firm. I want
 child custody law. Have him put me in touch with the best law firm
 free to take a case immediately. One who can be nice, if with a little
 if that's necessary."

Is it paternity? he asked, sounding as if he respected and feared.

No, *noted*, I thought about telling him to get the word straight
 from the Lawyer to Be Named Later, but Harb deserves better. I
 would demand to be a man sooner or later and would matter over
 the Lawyer to Be Named. I gave him an account of my feelings. In the
 again this afternoon I talk with the Deacons about the other
 voices crying in the church and in the house. Harb does not
 other, and that was where he remained when the two of us

"You're asking for trouble," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I'm in for a certain measure of it in any case," I said. "I've decided I want to dish out a little as well, that's all."

"You will not have the peace and quiet that a writer needs to do his best work," Harold said in an amusingly prim voice. I wondered what the reaction would be if I said that was okay. I hadn't written anything more riveting than a grocery list since Jo died, and maybe this would stir me up a little. But I didn't. Never let em see you sweat, the Noonan clan's motto. Someone should carve DON'T WORKY F.M.C.I. on the door of the family crypt.

Then I thought: *help* *rr*.

"That young woman needs a friend," I said, "and Jo would have wanted me to be one to her. Jo didn't like it when the little folks got stepped on."

"You think?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll see who I can find. And Mike—do you want me to come up on Friday for this depo?"

"No." It came out sounding needlessly abrupt, and I was followed by a silence that seemed not calculated but hard. "Listen, Harold, my caretaker said the actual custody hearing is scheduled soon. If it happens and you still want to come up, I'll give you a call. I can always use your moral support—you know that."

In my case it's *no* moral support, he replied, but he sounded cheery again.

We said goodbye. I walked back to the fridge and looked at the magnets. They were still scattered hell to breakfast, and that was sort of a relief. Even the spirits must have to rest sometimes.

I took the cordless phone, went out onto the deck, and plunked down in the chair where I'd been on the night of the Fourth, when Devore called. Even after my visit from daddy, I could still hardly believe that conversation. Devore had called me a liar, I had told him to stick my telephone number up his ass. We were off to a great start as neighbors.

I pulled the chair a little closer to the edge of the deck, which dropped a giddy forty feet or so to the slope between Sara's backside and

the lake I looked for the green woman and I saw only a silver tree that I myself not to be a complete thing, but that you say is a little tree, a single, stand even to feet. It to one side of the lake, and I was to look at. But this was apparently a case of the creature's story of the lake. I was both amazed and with a anxiety to realize that the road down there by The Street, and a woman from the lake, as well as from the lake. Some of it was due to the pine, just as in the tree, bare branch jutting off to the north like a bony pointing arm—but not all of it. From back here the bare's white limbs and narrow leaves still made a woman's shape, and when the wind shook it, her skirts of the tree, the green and silver swirled like long skirts.

I had said not to Harold's well-meant offer to come up, most extreme it was fully articulated, and as I looked at the tree woman, rather harshly in her own right. I knew why. Harold was dead. Harold was not yet, yet, nuance, Harold might be given of what ever was here. I didn't want that. I was scared, yes—standing on the dark, cold stairs and listening to the thumps from just below me. I had been feeling terrified—just I had—so felt fully alive for the first time in years. I was touching something in Sara that was entirely beyond my experience—and it fascinated me.

The careless plume rang in my lap, making me jump. I had not expected Max Devore or perhaps Fortman, his very best man, yes. It turned out to be a lawyer named John Storr, who is said as he might have graduated from law school fairly recently—like last week. Still, he worked for the firm of Avery, McLain, and Benson, on Fifth Avenue, and Park Avenue is a pretty good address for a lawyer even if he who still has a few of his milk teeth. If Henry Goldacker's, I Storr was a good one probably was. And his specialty was custody law.

Now tell me what's happening up there, he said when the introductions were over and the background had been sketched in.

I did my best, feeling my spirits rise a little as the recollection came. There's something oddly comforting about talking to a stranger, even if the bilateral clock has started rattling you away past the time you can point at when a lawyer becomes a lawyer. Yet, even if you were your lawyer is sympathetic, your lawyer makes notes, and you would find in all the right places. Most of the conversation, I was a case of

questions you can answer. And if you can't, your lawyer will help you find a way to do so, by God. Your lawyer is always on your side. Your enemies are his enemies. To him you are never shut but always Shinola.

When I had finished, John Storrow said: "Wow. I'm surprised the papers haven't gotten hold of this."

That never occurred to me. But I could see his point. The Devore family saga wasn't for the *New York Times* or *Boston Globe*, probably not even for the *Daily News*, but in weekly supermarket tabs like the *National Enquirer* or *Boston Post*, it would fit like a glove—instead of the girl, King Kong decides to snatch the girl's innocent child and carry it with him to the top of the Empire State Building. Oh, heck, unhand that baby you brat! It wasn't front-page stuff, no blood or celebrity morgue shots, but as a page-nine snouter it would do nicely. In my mind I composed a headline bearing over side by side pix of Warrington's Lodge and Matta's rusty doublewide: COMPTON-KING LIVES IN SPLENDOR AS HE TRIES TO TAKE YOUNG BEAUTY'S ONLY CHILD. Probably too long. I decided I wasn't writing anymore and said I needed an editor. That was pretty sad when you stopped to think about it.

Perhaps at some point we'd see that they do get the story. Storrow said in a musing tone. I realized that this was a man I could grow attached to, at least in my present angry mood. He grew brisker. "Wasn't I representing here, Mr. Noonan? You or the young lady? I vote for the young lady."

The young lady doesn't even know I've called you. She may think I've taken a bit too much on myself. She may, in fact, give me the roughest side of her tongue."

"Why would she do that?"

Because she's a Yankee—a *Mass* Yankee, the worst kind. On a given day, they can make the Irish look logical."

Perhaps, but she's the one with the target pinned to her shirt. I suggest that you call and tell her that."

I promised I would. It wasn't a hard promise to make, other I'd known I'd have to be in touch with her ever since I had accepted the summons from Deputy Footman. And who stands for Michael Noonan come Friday morning?"

case of her mother. I asked it thinking John would reply that the charges were clearly unfounded. I thought wrong.

The best thing? Devore's age. He's got to be older than God."

Based on what I've heard over the weekend, I think he must be eighty-five. That would make God older."

Yeah, but as a potential dad he makes Tony Randall look like a teenager. John said, and now he sounded positively gloating. "Think of it, Mac! As the kid graduates from high school the year Gramps turns one hundred. Also there's a chance the old man's overreached himself. Do you know what a guardian *ad litem* is?"

"No."

Essentially it's a lawyer the court appoints to protect the interests of the child. A fee for the service comes out of court costs, but it's a pit-trance. Most people who agree to serve as guardian *ad litem* have strictly altruistic motives—but not all of them. In any case, the *ad litem* puts his own spin on the case. Judges don't have to take the guy's advice, but they almost always do. It makes a judge look stupid to reject the advice of his own appointee, and the thing a judge hates above all others is looking stupid."

"Devore will have his own lawyer?"

John laughed. "How about half a dozen at the actual custody hearing?"

"Are you serious?"

The guy is eighty-five. That's too old for Ferraris, too old for bungee jumping in Tibet, and too old for whores unless he's a mighty man. What does that leave for him to spend his money on?"

"Lawyers," I said bleakly.

"Yep."

"And Mattie Devore? What does she get?"

Thanks to you, she gets me," John Storrow said. "It's like a John Grisham novel, isn't it? Pure gold. Meantime, I'm interested in Dargin, the asshole. If Devore hasn't been expecting any real trouble, he may have been wise enough to put temptation in Dargin's way. And Dargin may have been stupid enough to succumb. Hey, who knows what we might find?"

But I was a turn back. "She gets you," I said. "Thanks to me. And if I wasn't here to stick in my oar, what would she get then?"

"*Bubkes*. That's Yiddish. It means—"

"I know what it means," I said. "That's incredible."

"Nope, not American, is *schvitz*. You know me, I'm Jewish. I'm the one who stands outside most city courthouses?"

"Uh-huh."

"Suppose some kid kills a pretty girl. Is your sister going to be the one to go out with the blondes and the brunettes and the redheads? You see that judge? I don't put out a sister for regular court appearances. I work in custody cases where the parents are dead and the courts are poor. And sexual-exploitation cases, too. I have a few cases where something is still terrible for the child, but the judge says it's the best choice for custody."

"Mattie Devore's got to have you, doesn't she?"

"Yes. John said simply, 'Call her, meet her, and tell me what she's like.'"

"I hope I can do that."

"So do I. And listen—there's one more thing."

"What?"

"You lied to Devore on the telephone."

"Bullshit!"

"Nope, nope. I remember. I told my sister that you're a Jew. I told her you know it. You told Devore that mother and son were together, the kid was picking flowers, everything was fine. You put everything in there except Bambi and Thumper."

"I was sitting up straight in my desk chair then. I remember. I also told that my own cleverness had been overlooked. He was right again. I never came out and said anything. But he had said it. I said the word more than once. I remember that very clearly."

"Uh-huh, and if he was talking about once, it's not a word. It's not to actually count how many times you used it."

"At first I said that answer. I was thinking, *schvitz*. The conversation I'd had with him remained pragmatic and businesslike, yet I was a little jittery. And then I remembered from all those years as a student at Santa Laugis. Had that steady power of observation been working on Saturday night?"

"I guess maybe there could be a tape," I said reluctantly.

"Uh-huh. And if Devore's lawyer gets it to the *ad litem*, how do you think you'll sound?"

"Careful, I said. Mayoc look like a man with something to hide."

"Or a man spinning yarns. And you're good at that, aren't you? After all, it's what you do for a living. At the custody hearing, Devore's lawyer is apt to mention that. If he then produces one of the people who passed you shortly after Mattie arrived on the scene—a person who testifies that the young lady seemed upset and flustered—how do you think you'll sound then?"

"Like a liar," I said, and then: "Ah, fuck."

"Fear not, Mike. Be of good cheer."

"What should I do?"

"Spike their guns before they can fire them. Tell Dargin exactly what happened. Get it in the depo. Emphasize the fact that the little girl thought she was waking safely. Make sure you get in that crossmatch thing. I love that."

"Then if they have a tape they'll play it and I'll look like a story-changing schmuck."

"I don't think so. You weren't a sworn witness when you talked to Devore, were you? There you were, sitting out on your deck and minding your own business, watching the fireworks show. Out of the blue tats graciously and assuage calls you. Starts ranting. Didn't even give him your number, did you?"

"No."

"Your *unlisted* number."

"No."

"And when he *said* he was Maxwell Devore, he could have been any one, right?"

"Right."

"He could have been the Shah of Iran."

"No, the Shah's dead."

"The Shah's *eat*, then. But he could have been a nosy neighbor—or a prankster."

"Yes."

"And you said what you said with all those possibilities in mind. But

Now that you're part of it all, you can't pretend you know the whole truth and nothing but."

You said that before, but it didn't do anything. It was back full-force now.

You can't lie better than the truth. Make it sound like you know more in a few days and this isn't the Arson case, it's that.

"Yes."

All right, we're done. I want to hear from you tomorrow. Meet before an anteburnish tomorrow. It's a great idea, but

"I'll try."

It's a really barks, you know what I could do to her?

"I think so. Thanks, John."

One way or another, we'll talk very soon, she said, and I hung up.

I sat where I was for a while. Once I pushed the button and listened to the line on the cordless phone, then pushed it again to check if I could talk to Mattie, but I wasn't quite ready yet. I decided to take a walk instead.

If she really barks, you know what to do, don't you?

Of course. Remind her that she could be a doctor, or be a priest. That she couldn't afford to go to Yankee, refusing to try from Mattie. No more author of *Born This, The Red Soil* Mattie and the son of a bitch, *How This People*. Remind her that she could have her own father's doctor, but likely not both.

Hey, Mattie, pick one

I walked almost to the end of the lane, stopping at Towels Meadow with its pretty view down to the cup of the lake at the foot of the White Mountains. The water dreamed under a pale sky looking gray with a tipped blue head, one way back when violet pecked the shore. The sense of mystery was very much with me. That's what Mattie

Over forty black people had settled here at the turn of the century. I sat there for a while, anyway, according to Mattie. However, according to *A History of Cook County, Illinois*, which was first published in 1907, the county's black community in Prentiss was a black respect, too much, then related most of their old lives to the story of the

part of a musical group which had first been called The Red Top Boys and then Sara Tidwell and the Red Top Boys. They had bought the meadow and a good-sized tract of lakeside land from a man named Douglas Day. The money had been saved up over a period of ten years, according to Sara Tidwell, who did the dickerings as a Red Top. Sara Tidwell had played what was then known as "chickenscratch guitar."

There had been a vast uproar about it in town, and even a meeting to protest the advent of these darkies, which come in a Horde. Things had settled down and turned out okay, as things have a way of doing, more often than not. The shanty town most locals had expected on Day's Hill (there so Tidwell's Meadow was called in 1900, when Sara Tidwell bought the land on behalf of his extensive clan) had never appeared. Instead, a number of neat white cabins sprang up, surrounding a larger building that might have been intended as a group meeting place, a rehearsal area, or perhaps, at some point, a performance hall.

Sara and the Red Top Boys (sometimes there was a Red Top Girl in there, as well; membership in the band was fluid, changing with every performance) played around western Maine for over a year, maybe closer to two years. It was ad up and down the Western Line—Farmington, Skowhegan, Bridgton, Gates Falls, Castle Rock, Motton, Fryburg—you could still come across their old show-posters at barn bazaars and junkyard raffles. Sara and the Red Tops were great favorites on the circuit, and they got a good thing at some on the TR, too, which never surprised me. At the end of the day Robert Frost—that itinerant and often unpleasant poet—was right: in the northeastern three we really do believe that good fences make good neighbors. We squawk and then look a misery face, the wind whirling misty eyes and a tucked-down mouth. They pay the tolls, we say. I ain't never had to shoot one a their legs, we say. They keep themselves to themselves, we say, as if solution were a virtue. And, of course, the dining virtue. They don't take charity."

And at some point Sara Tidwell became Sara Laugas.

In the end, though, TR 90 must have been what they wanted, because after paying a county tax or two in the late summer of 1901, the clan moved on. Their neat little cabins provided summer-rental

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meant for the Daylamyanta. I saw what they were doing. The
trees which flanked the east and north sides of the lake had been

Except for her music, that was. Her music had lived

I got up from the rock I had been sitting on, stretched out
my back, and walked back down the same steep slope. I
went

CHAPTER

12

During my hike back down the lane to the house, I tried to think about nothing at all. My first editor used to say that eighty-five per cent of what goes on in a novelist's head is none of his business, a sentiment I've never believed should be restricted to just writers. So-called higher thought is, as a rule, and large, highly overrated. When trouble comes and steps have to be taken, I find it's generally better to just stand aside and let the boys in the basement do their work. That's blue collar labor down there, non-union guys with lots of muscles and tattoos. Instinct is their specialty, and they refer problems upstairs for actual cogitation only as a last resort.

When I tried to call Mattie Devore, an extremely peculiar thing happened—none that had nothing at all to do with sparks, as far as I could tell. Instead of an open ham line when I pushed the cordless phone button, I got silence. Then, just as I was thinking I must have left the phone in the north bedroom off the back, I realized it wasn't complete silence. Distinct is a radio transmission from deep space, cheerful and quacky as an animated duck, some guy with a fair amount of Brooklyn in his voice.

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was singing. He followed her to see if he had a chance to meet her one day. He followed her to send one day when he was going to the city. I pushed my mouth to see what was there. I saw a woman's voice. I heard Shari's voice. I heard a woman's voice.

Mattie, being confused, never corrected her. If her sister had more than a like Ms. or Mrs. Devereaux, it seems probable she should know who it was, based on the girl's words. Even if not, a previous conversation had been relatively brief. Mycroft's casual assessment recognized the background, was a bit made to order, and to Kyra.

"Mr. Noonan" has scored more big hits than ever. The series never even rang!

I must have picked mine up just as yours was, because I said "That happens from time to time." But how many times I wonder, did it happen when the person calling you was the one who ever self had been planning to call? Maybe quite often actually. I feel that a coincidence? Live or Memorize? Either way, it seemed a most meaningful look across the long, low living room, into the glassy eyes of Benton the moose, and thought "You should have been there, please."

I suppose she said dubitantly. I apologize about it. It's the first place—it's a presumption. Your number's anasteth. I know.

[illegible]

I got it from your file at the library, so went on scanning. I crossed. That's where I work. In the background, Mary H. "Little Lamb" had given way to "The Farmer in the Dell."

It's quite alright. I said, 'Especially since you're the person I was picking up the phone to call.'

"Me? Why?"

'Ladies first.'

She gave a brief nervous laugh. I want to be with you to the end. That is Ki and I want to invite you to dinner. I should have done that before now. You were awfully kind to us the other day. Well, good night.

"Yes," I said with a hesitant grin. "With a few. We've got a few things to talk about, anyway."

There was a pause. In the background, the mouse was taking the cheese. As a kid I used to think all these things happened in a vast gray factory called The Hi Ho Dairy O.

"Martie? Still there?"

He's dragged you into it, hasn't he? That awful old man. Now her voice sounded not nervous but somehow dead.

Well, yes and no. You could argue that fate dragged me into it, or coincidence, or God. I wasn't there that morning because of Max Devore; I was chasing the elusive Villageburger."

She didn't laugh, but her voice brightened a little, and I was glad. People who talk in that dead, affectless way are, by and large, frightened people. Sometimes people who have been outright terrorized. "I'm still sorry for dragging you into my trouble." I had an idea she might start to wonder who was dragging whom after I pitched her on John Storrow, and was glad it was a discussion I wouldn't have to have with her on the phone.

"In any case, I'd love to come to dinner. When?"

"Would this evening be too soon?"

"Absolutely not."

That's wonderful. We have to eat early, though, so my little guy doesn't fall asleep in her dessert. Is six okay?"

"Yes."

"Ki will be excited. We don't have much company."

"She hasn't been wandering again, has she?"

I thought she might be offended. Instead, this time she *did* laugh. Good. No. All the fuss on Saturday scared her. Now she comes in to tell me it's switching from the swing in the side yard to the sandbox in back. She's talked about you a lot, though. She calls you that tall gay who— for me. I think she's worried you might be mad at her.

Tell her I'm not. I say. No, check that. I'll tell her myself. Can I bring anything?"

Bottle. I want, she asked, a little doubtfully. Or maybe that's pretentious. I was only going to cook hamburgers on the grill and make potato salad."

"I'll bring an unpretentious bottle."

That's good, she said. This is sort of exciting. We never have company

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'... was horrified to find him so close to me ... I knew that letter had
 been sent enclosing it as my first acquaintance and I did not
 much for thinking of me.'

As I hang up I remember, oh, Storr was so big, but it was so visible with her not to hand over any extra cash for the room, just put it. If she was barbecuing, we'd probably see it when we went to see we had our car on the first floor of the city, my car. She would, however, take the potting at some point, so I'd never inside I would then see the potting and go. And it was very interesting, on the wall, or her commemorative plates from the British Museum, or whatever she had going in the way of travel decoration. I'd let Kyra show me her bedroom and exclaim with wonder over her collection of assortments of stuffed animals and her favorite collection of books. There are all sorts of priorities in life. Some you'd never get to first place, but I suspect there are quite a few he can't

Am I handling this right, Banter? I asked the stuffed ones. If low once for yes, twice for no."

I was halfway down the hall leading to the north wing, thinking I was taking a cool shower when from behind me, very softly, came a bell ringing at the cell around Hunter's neck. I stopped, head cocked, my shirt soaked, one hand waiting for the bell to ring again. It didn't. After a moment, I went the rest of the way to the bathroom and stepped in the shower.

The Loser view General had a pretty good selection of t-shirts (and I was at one or two — not much local demand for it, they're out of the stores probably bought a fair quantity) — and I selected a couple of M-60s. It was probably a bit more expensive than Matt's had had, but I could peel the price-sticker off and hope she wouldn't know the difference. There was a line at the checkout (mostly folks with summer shirts pulled on over their bathing suits, and some in their beach sticking to their legs). While I was waiting, my first impulse was to pick up the impulse items which are always strewn about the cashier. Among them were several plastic bags labeled "DON'T TOUCH" with a drawing of a cartoon refrigerator with the message "DON'T TOUCH ME". According to the written info, there were two sets of 100,000 units of

Magnabac, PLUS EXTRA VOWELS. I grabbed two sets — then added a third, thinking that Mattie Devore's kid was probably just the right age for such an item.

Kyra saw me palming into the weekly dooryard, jumped off the slumpy little swingset beside the trailer, belted to her mother, and hid behind her. When I approached the nubachi which had been set up beside the underpass front steps, the child who'd spoken to me so fearlessly on Saturday was just a pecking blue eye and a chubby hand grasping a fold of her mother's sundress below the hip.

Two hours brought considerable changes, however. As twilight deepened, Kyra sat on my lap in the trailer's living room, listening carefully — at first with growing weariness — as I read her the ever-enthalling story of Cinderella. The couch we were on was a shade of brown which can by law only be sold in discount stores, and extremely lumpy into the bargain, but I still felt ashamed of my casual preconceptions about what I would find inside this trailer. On the wall above and behind us there was an Edward Hopper print — that one of a lonely lunch counter late at night — and across the room, over the small Formica-topped table in the kitchen nook, was one of Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* series. Even more than the Hopper, it looked at home in Mattie Devore's den. Everywhere I have wondered why that should have been true, but it was

Crass slipper-wearer perfection, Kyra said in a muzzy, considering way.

"No way," I said. "Slipper glass was specially made in the Kingdom of Grimore. Smooth and unbreakable as long as you didn't sing high C while wearing them."

"I get a pair?"

"Sorry, Kyra," I said. "No one knows how to make slipper glass anymore. It's a lost art, like Toledo steel." It was not in the trailer and she was not against my shirt where her upper body lay, but I wouldn't have minded it. Having a kid on my lap was pretty great. Outside, her mother was singing and gathering up dishes from the card table we'd used for our picnic. Hearing her sing was also pretty great.

Goodnight, Kyra said, pointing to the picture of Cinderella scrubbing the floor. The little girl peeking nervously around her

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to their sleep was gone. An angry frowning cloud had taken the place of Saturday morning was gone, here was only a deep midwinter darkness, cold and bright and trusting. Before I can read anything more.

"Do you need to go pee-pee?"

No," she said, looking at me with some disdain. Besides, there's no urinating. Peas are waiting for it with me, that's what your Mother says. And I already went. But if you don't go fast in the story, I'll fall to sleep.

"You can't hurry stories with magic in them, Ki."

"Well go as fast as you can."

Okay. I turned the page. Here was Cinderella, trying to sew a good sport, waving goodbye to her asshole sisters as they went off to the ball, dressed like starlets at a disco. No sooner had Cinderella said goodbye to Tammy Faye and Vanna.

"Those are the sisters' names?"

"The ones I made up for them, yes. Is that okay?"

Sure. She settled more comfortably on my lap and I dropped my head against my chest again.

No sooner had Cinderella said goodbye to Tammy Faye and Vanna, than a bright light suddenly appeared in the corner of the kitchen. Stepping out of it was a beautiful lady in a silver gown. The jewels in her hair glowed like stars."

"Fairy godmother," Kyra said matter-of-factly.

"Yes."

Mattie came in carrying the remaining malt-bottle of Monday and the blackened barbecue implements. Her sadness was bright red. On her feet she wore low-topped sneakers so white that they seemed to glow in the gloom. Her hair was tied back, but although she still wasn't as gorgeous as country club babe I had briefly loved once, she was very pretty. Now she looked at Kyra, looked at me, and said her voice was made a lifting gesture with her arms. I saw a small, sad, sending down a message that neither of us was ready quite yet.

I resumed reading while Mattie went to work scrubbing her kitchen cooking tools. She was still humming. By the time she had finished with the spatula, Ki's body had taken on an additional dimension when I recognized at once she'd picked out an Enid Blyton story, *The Enchanted*

Heather of Fairy Tales and put it on the coffee-table beside a couple of other stacked books—whatever Mattie was reading. I presumed. I looked up, saw her looking back at me from the kitchen and flicked her the V-for-Victory sign. “No man, the winner by a technical knockout in the eighth round,” I said.

Mattie dried her hands on a dishtowel and came over. “Give her to me. I stood up with Kyra in my arms instead. I’ll carry Where?”

She pointed. “On the left.”

I carried the baby down the hallway, which was narrow enough so I had to be careful not to bump her feet on one side or the top of her head on the other. At the end of the hall was the bathroom, stringently clean. On the right was a closed door which led, I assumed, into the bedroom Mattie had once shared with Lance Devore and where she now slept alone. If there was a boyfriend who overnights even some of the time, Mattie had done a good job of erasing his presence from the trailer.

I slid carefully through the door on the left and looked at the little bed with its ruffled coverlet of cabbage roses, the table with the doll house on it, the picture of the Emerald City on one wall, the sign (fence in shiny stick-on letters) on another one that read CISA KYRA. Devore wanted to take her away from here, a place where nothing was wrong where, to the contrary, everything was perfectly right. Cisa Kyra was the room of a little girl who was growing up okay.

Put her on the bed and then go put yourself another glass of wine, Mattie said. I’ll zip her in her pjs and join you. I know we’ve got stuff to talk about.”

Okay. I put her down, then bent a little farther, meaning to plant a kiss on her nose. I almost thought better of it, then did it anyway. When I left, Mattie was smiling, so I guess it was okay.

I poured myself a little more wine, walked back into the scrap of living room with it and looked at the two books beside K’s fairy-tale collection. I’m always curious about what people are reading; the only better insight into them is the contents of their medicine cabinets, and ram-maging through your host’s drags and nostrums is frowned upon by the better class.

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The books were different enough to carry a story of their own. I got a new playing card bookmark and at three corners it showed that I was a fan of a superbakes edition of Richard North Patterson's *Vanishing Act*. I appreciated the taste. Patterson and DeMille are probably the best of the most popular novelists. The other bookmark set told me my next stop was *The Callahan Series* by *Henry A. Kendall*. Almost as if it were Richard North Patterson as you could get. According to the good people who stamped in the thickness of the pages this was a challenge. The Four Lakes Community Library. This was a lovely little store on a road about five miles south of Dark Shore Lake where Route 18 passes through IR and into Mottin. Where Mattie worked, presumably. I opened the first bookmark, another playing card, and saw she was reading *Bartleby*.

I didn't understand that, she said from behind me, startling me so badly that I almost dropped the books. I kept it as a good enough story, but I haven't the slightest idea what it means. The story on now, I've even figured out who did it.

It's a strange pair to read in tandem. I said, putting them back down.

The Patterson I'm reading for pleasure. Mattie said she went into the kitchen, locked briefly (and with some longing I thought) for a bottle of wine, then opened the fridge and took out a pitcher of Kool-Aid. On the fridge door were words her daughter had already assembled from her Magnabot bag and a bottle and a bottle of Saint-Clair I presumed. Well, I'm reading them both for pleasure. I guess but were due to discuss 'Bartleby' in this little get-up. I'm a part of. We meet Thursday nights at the library. I've started about ten pages to go.

"A readers' circle."

Unhuh. Mrs. Briggs leads. She turned it long before I was born. She's the head librarian at Four Lakes, you know.

"I do. Lindy Briggs is my caretaker's sister-in-law."

Mattie smiled. "Small world, isn't it?"

"No, it's a big world but a small town."

She started to lean back against the counter with her glass of Kool-Aid, then thought better of it. Wouldn't we go outside to sit? That way anyone passing can see that we're self-crossed out that we can't have anything on inside-out."

I looked at her, startled. She looked back with a kind of cynical good humor. It wasn't an expression that looked particularly at home on her face.

"I may only be twenty-one, but I'm not stupid," she said. "He's watching me. I know it, and you probably do, too. On another night I might be tempted to say fuck him if he can't take a joke, but it's cooler out there, and the smoke from the hibachi will keep the worst of the bugs away. Have I shocked you? If so, I'm sorry."

"You haven't." She had, a little. "No need to apologize."

We carried our drinks down the not quite steady cinderblock steps and sat side-by-side in a couple of lawn-chairs. To the left of us the coals in the arched glow of soft rose in the growing gloom. Mattie leaned back, placed the cold curve of her glass briefly against her forehead, then drank most of what was left, the ice cubes sliding against her teeth with a click and a rattle. Crickets hummed in the woods behind the trailer and across the road. Farther up Highway 68, I could see the bright white fluorescents over the gas stand at the Lakeview General. The seat of my chair was a little lumpy, the interwoven straps a little frayed, and the old girl canted pretty severely to the left, but there was still no place I'd rather have been sitting just then. This evening had turned out to be a quiet little miracle . . . at least, so far. We still had John Storrow to get to.

"I'm glad you came on a Tuesday," she said. "Tuesday nights are hard for me. I'm always thinking of the balgame down at Warrington's. The guys'll be picking up the gear by now—the bats and bases and catcher's mask—and putting it back in the storage cabinet behind home plate. Drinking their last beers and smoking their last cigarettes. That's where I met my husband, you know. I'm sure you've been to it all that by now."

I couldn't see her face clearly, but I could hear the faint tinge of bitterness which had crept into her voice—and guessed she was still wearing the cynical expression. It was too old for her, but I thought she'd come by it honestly enough. Although if she didn't watch out, it would take root and grow.

"I heard a version from Bill, yes—Lindy's brother-in-law."

"Oh, yeah—our story's on retail. You can get it at the store, or the Village Cafe, or at that old blabbermouth's garage—watch my father-in-law rescued from Western Savings, by the way. He stepped in just

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above the bank could tell how. Now Dick Brooks is the one who looks Max Devere's walking talking. I see him every day. I see him somewhere in Mr. Devere's yard just off the Alameda. You must've, or you would've have risked eating him for breakfast.

I wanted to get away from that. I told him that it was my steady job, not as less. Of course it was easier for me to see that it was my job, who had been trained into the black job that was the center of a bag of war type. They still play softball at Waregton. "Even though Devere bought the place?"

Yes indeed. He goes down to the field in his motorcade every Tuesday evening and watches. I have seen other things I have seen since he came back here that are just attempts to say that was his opinion, but I think he genuinely loves the sport. The White more women goes, too. Brings a extra oxygen tank, a little red wheelchair with a white wall tire on the front. She keeps a helmet with a mitt in there, too, in case any foul pops come up over the backstop to where he sits. He caught one near the start of the season. I heard and got a standing O from the players and the fans who come to watch.

Going to the games puts him in touch with his son, you think.

Martie smile grimly. I don't think Lance seemed as nervous as much, but when he's at the ballfield. They play hard at Waregton. I should hit him with their feet, jump into the pitcher's box for the flyballs, curse each other when they do something wrong. That's what old Max Devere enjoys, that's why he never misses a Tuesday evening game. He likes to watch them score and get up cheering.

"Is that how Lance played?"

She thought about it carefully. He played hard, but he wasn't there. He was there just for the fun of it. We all were. We women, short and just virgins, Barney. There aren't with. Cindy was only sixteen, was stand behind the backstop on the first base side, smoking cigarettes, waving punks to keep the bags away, cheering. On days when they do something good, laughing when they do something stupid. We drank sodas or share a can of beer. I did not. Helen Greaves is my next boss. Krauter the chairman. I kept getting. Sometimes we'd have a cold. A big Cate afterward. He Buddy'd make us pizzas. Owners pay. All friends

again, you know, after the game. We'd sit there laughing and yelling and blowing straw wrappers around, some of the guys half loaded but nobody mean. In those days they got all the mean out on the ballfield. And you know what? None of them come to see me. Not Helen Geary, who was my best friend. Not Richie Lattimore, who was Lance's best friend. The two of them would talk about nicks and birds and the kinds of trees there were across the lake for hours on end. They came to the funeral, and for a little while after, and then . . . you know what it was like? When I was a kid, our well dried up. For awhile you'd get a trickle when you turned on the tap, but then there was just air. Just air. The cynicism was gone and there was only hurt in her voice. I saw Helen at Christmas, and we promised to get together for the twins' birthday, but we never did. I think she's scared to come near me."

"Because of the old man?"

Wasn't that? But that's okay, life goes on. She sat up, drank the rest of her Kick-Art, and set the glass aside. What about you, Mike? Did you come back to write a book? Are you going to name the TR? This was a local *show* that I remembered with an almost painful twinge of nostalgia. Locals with great plans were said to be bent on naming the TR.

No, I said, and then astonished myself by saying, "I don't do that anymore."

I think I expected her to leap to her feet, overturning her chair and uttering a sharp cry of horrified denial. All of which says a good deal about me, I suppose, and none of it flattering.

You've retired? she asked, sounding calm and remarkably unhorrified. "Or is it writer's block?"

Well, it's certainly not one of retirement. I realized the conversation had taken a rather amusing turn. I'd come primarily to sell her on John Starrow—to shove John Starrow down her throat, if that was what it took—and instead I was for the first time discussing my inability to work. For the first time with anyone.

"So it's a block."

I used to think so—but now I'm not so sure. I think novelists may come equipped with a certain number of stories to tell—they're built into the software. And when they're gone, they're gone.

BAG OF BONES

"I could tell that," she said. "Maybe you'd rather watch me stay here. Maybe that's part of the reason you came back."

"Maybe you're right."

"Are you scared?"

Sometimes. Mostly about what I'd do if there were no more good thoughts to write, and my wife was the one with the pen in her hand.

"I'm scared I too," she said. "Scared like Adrienne was scared."

"That he'll win his custody case? Mattie, that's what I—"

"The custody case is only part of it," she said. "I'm scared just to be here, on the TR. It started early this summer—long after I knew where I meant to get away from and where I'd end up. It's strange work. It's like watching thousands gather near New Harp, then, and they come pouring across the lake. I can't put it away but not that, except—" She shifted, crossing her legs and then trying to get away from the skirt of her dress against the line of her skin, as if she were cold.

Except that I'd woken up several times lately sure that I wasn't in the bedroom alone. Once when I was sure I wasn't in the house at all. Sometimes it's just a feeling—like a headache or a cramp in your nerves—and sometimes I think I can hear whispering, or crying, or talking, or laughing, about two weeks ago, this was—and forgetting it all the next day. The next morning the canister was overturned, and the floor was spilled on the counter. Someone had written a note on it that night, but it was Kit, but she said she didn't do it. Besides, it wasn't her printing; hers is so strongly I don't know if it could ever write like this. Her handwriting—Mike, you don't think he could be sending someone to get me out, and freak me out, do you? I mean that's just stupid, right?

I don't know, I said. I thought of something then, up the stairs, in the dark, as I stood on the stairs. I thought of all the printed words, magnets on my refrigerator door, and all the old letters in the trash. My skin felt more than a little itchy then. A few more in the next two days, good, that was exactly how you felt when something was a little out of place, when it felt like the world just tickled you on the back of the neck.

Maybe it's ghosts," she said, "or maybe in a million years, that was more frightened than amused."

I opened my mouth to tell her about what I'd been hoping to do, if

Sara Laughlin then closed it again. There was a clear choice to be made here: either we could be sidetracked into a discussion of the paranormal, or we could come back to the visible world. The one where Max Devore was trying to steal himself a kid.

"Yeah," I said. "The spirits are about to speak."

I wish I could see your face better. There was something in it just then. What?"

I don't know," I said. But right now I think we'd better talk about Kyra. Okay?"

"Okay. In the faint glow of the n-back, I could see her settling herself in her chair, as if to take a blow.

I've been subpoenaed to give a deposition in Castle Rock on Friday. Before Emer Durgin, who's Kyra's guardian *ad litem*."

That pompous little toad isn't Kis anything," she burst out. He's in my father-in-law's hip pocket, just like Dickie Osgood and Max's pet real estate guy! Dickie and Emer Durgin drank together down at The Mellow Tiger, or at least they did until this business really got going. Then someone probably told them it would look bad, and they stopped.

The papers were served by a deputy named George Footman."

Just one more of the usual suspects, Mattie said in a thin voice. Dickie Osgood's a snake, but George Footman's a junkyard dog. He's been suspended off the cops twice. Once more and he can work for Max Devore full-time."

Well, he scared me. I tried not to show it, but he did. And people who scare me make me angry. I called my agent in New York and then hired a lawyer. One who makes a specialty of child custody cases.

I tried to see how she was taking this and couldn't, although we were sitting fairly close together. But she still had that set look like a woman who expects to take some hard blows. Or perhaps for Mattie the blows had already started to fall.

Slowly, not allowing myself to rush, I went through my conversation with John Storrow. I emphasized what Storrow had said about sexual equality—that it was apt to be a negative force in her case, making it easier for Judge Rancourt to take Kyra away. I also came down hard on the fact that Devore could have all the lawyers he wanted—not to men-

out she surprised me. Not for the last time either. "That if you save someone's life, you're responsible for them."

"Yes. It's also about what's fair and what's right, but I think mostly it's about wanting to be part of something where I make a difference. I look back on the four years since my wife died, and there's nothing there. Not even a hook where Marjorie the shy typist meets a handsome stranger."

She sat thinking this over, watching as a fully loaded pulp truck snored past on the highway its headlights glaring and its load of logs swaying from side to side like the hips of an overweight woman. "Don't you *root* for us," she said at last. She spoke in a low, unexpectedly fierce voice. "Don't you root for us like he roots for his team of-the-week down at the softball field. I need help and I know it, but I won't have that. I *will* have it. We're not a game. Ki and me. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"You know what people in town will say, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm a lucky girl, don't you think? First I marry the son of an extremely rich man, and after he dies, I fall under the protective wing of another rich guy. Next I'll probably move in with Donald Trump."

"Cut it out."

I'd probably believe it myself if I were on the other side. But I wonder if anyone notices that lucky Mattie's still living in a Motel trailer and can't afford health insurance. Or that her kid got most of her vaccinations from the County Nurse. My parents died when I was fifteen. I have a brother and a sister, but they're both a lot older and both out of state. My parents were cranks—not physically abusive, but there was plenty of the other kinds. It was like growing up in a— a rough motel. My dad was a pulper, my mom was a bourbon beautician whose one ambition was to own a Mary Kay pink Cadillac. He drowned in Keweenaw Pond. She drowned in her own vomit about six months later. How do you like it so far?

"Not very much. I'm sorry."

After Mom's funeral my brother Hagar offered to take me back to Rhode Island, but I could tell his wife wasn't exactly nuts about having

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...and I was very young then and I was still a child. I just made the decision to go. It was a very big deal for me now, but it was a very big deal then.

[illegible]

I ended up going to live with my aunt Florence, just a mile off the road. It took us, bent three weeks to drive over what took us an hour very much, but we made it work for two years. He'd been married a junior and senior years. I got a summer job at Warrington's and he'd come. When he asked me to marry him, Aunt Flo told me to give permission. When I told her I was pregnant, she made a loud noise. I didn't need her. "You dropped out of school?"

She grinned, inclined. 'I didn't want to spend six months having people watch me swell up like a cello. I can support. I'm. He said I could take the equivalency test I did last year. It was easy. An A on it. K and I are on our own. Even if they don't agree to me, I'm what he's got. She works in the Castle Rock Text Factory. She makes about sixteen thousand dollars a year.'

I nodded again, thinking that my last week at Fremont was indeed
been about that. My last *week*! Then I remembered something Ki
had told me on the day I met her.

When I was carrying Kyra out of the room she said that I was a mad, she'd go to her white nana. It's not like I had to ask her to. Except I didn't really have to ask. I may have to make connections. Roger's Whitmore's the white nana of Dorcas's sister. But that means...

That Kas been with them. Yes, whether I go or not, it is a duty for her to visit her grandpa—and Roger, too, since he is always in need of attention. Once or twice a week are sometimes for her, even just to sit on the white poppa—at least she did at first, and then she said I had to sit like a creepy woman. I thought Mattie should sit there, but she said no. The night was still very warm.

Devoce, the first say he was "min" (shorter) than the rest, but in the

ask if he could see his granddaughter while he was here. Not as p.c., he was just as if he'd never tried to buy me off when Lance told him we were going to get married."

"Did he?"

"Uh-huh. The first offer was a hundred thousand. That was in August of 1994, after Lance called him to say we were getting married. In mid-September, I kept quiet about it. A week later, the offer went up to two hundred thousand."

"For what, precisely?"

To remove my bitch hooks and relocate with no forwarding address. This time I did tell Lance, and he hit the roof. Called his old man and said we were going to be married whether he liked it or not. Told him that if he ever wanted to see his grandchild, he had better cut the shit and behave."

With another parent, I thought, that was probably the most reasonable response Lance Devore could have made. I respected him for it. The only problem was that he wasn't dealing with a reasonable man, he was dealing with the fellow who, as a child, had stolen Scooter Larrabee's new sled.

These offers were made by Devore himself, over the telephone. Both when Lance wasn't around. Then, about ten days before the wedding, I had a visit from Dickie Osgood. I was to make a call to a number in Delaware, and when I did—

"Mattie shook her head. "You wouldn't believe it. It's like something out of one of your books."

"May I guess?"

"If you want."

"He tried to buy the child. He tried to buy Kyra."

Her eyes widened. A scintillating moon had come up and I could see that look of surprise well enough.

"How much?" I asked. "In millions. How much for you to give birth, leave Devore's grandchild with Lance, then scat?"

Two million dollars, she whispered. Deposited in the bank of my choice, as long as it was west of the Mississippi and I signed an agreement to stay away from her—and from Lance—until, at least, April twentieth, 2016."

"The year Ky turns twenty-one."

"Lance was angry."

So angry he replied to his father by e-mail instead of calling. He stuttered, you see, and the more upset he was, the worse his stammer became. A polite conversation would have been impossible.

Now, at last, I thought I had a clear picture. Lance Devore had written his father an unthinkable letter—unthinkable, that was, if you happened to be Max Devore. The letter said that Lance didn't want to hear from his father again, and Mattie didn't either. He wouldn't be welcome in their home that Modular trailer wasn't quite the humble wood-cutter's cottage of a Brothers Grimm tale, but it was close enough for kissing. He wouldn't be welcome to visit following the birth of their baby, and if he was the gail to send the child a present then or later, it would be returned. Stay out of my life, Dad. This time you've gone too far to forgive.

There are undoubtedly diplomatic ways of handling an offended child, some wise and some crafty—but ask yourself this: would a diplomatic father have gotten himself into such a situation to begin with? Would a man with even minimal insight into human nature have offered his son's fiancée a beauty—ones so enormous it probably had little real sense or meaning to her—to give up her firstborn child? And he'd offered this devil's bargain to a girl-woman of seventeen—an age when the romantic view of life is at its quite high tide. If nothing else, Devore should have waited awhile before making his final offer. You could argue that he didn't know it he *had* waited—but it wouldn't be a persuasive argument. I thought Mattie was right—deep in that wrinkled old prairie which served him as a heart, Max Devore thought he was going to live forever.

In the end, he hadn't been able to restrain himself. There was the sled I'd watched this cold first winter rise, on the other side of the window. As he had to do was break the glass and take it. He'd been doing it all his life—and somehow he'd tried to his son's e-mail not craftily, as a man of thirty years and so on, but curiously, as the child would have done if the glass in the sacred window had proved immune to his hammering fists. Lance didn't want him meddling. Fine! Lance would live with his backward Daisy Mae in a tent or a trailer or a gar-

planned to warn. He said I was a first-class worker and a good and real employee. See how the other side felt.

In other words, you can't quit on me, son. You're fired.

We didn't run into each other's arms at all, so I said, "Mattie, I'm not a quitter. But I was an employee, which I don't quit. I'm a friend. I tried to be decent to him. He didn't need a superior. He refused. I was afraid there might be legal ramifications."

I didn't do it, but I like your caution. What happened when you saw Kyra for the first time, Mattie? Do you remember?"

I'd never regret it. She reached into the pocket of her dress, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and stuck one out. She looked at me with a mixture of greed and disgust. I quit these because I ate so much better. I really afford them, and I know he was right. But the nicotine sickness only smoke a pack a week, and I know I'd lived well even without it. I could but sometimes I need the comfort. Do you want one?"

I shook my head. She lit up, and in a matter of minutes there she was. Her face was way past pretty. What a beautiful man made of. I was wondering.

He met his granddaughter for the first time, he said at least. "Mattie said, 'We were at Dokin's Funeral Home in Milton. It was the evening.' Do you know about that?"

"On yes," I said, thinking of Jo.

The casket was closed but they still had it viewing. When I went out to have a cigarette, I told Kirtax on the funeral home steps and wouldn't get the smoke, and I went a little way down the walk. His big gray limo pulled up. I'd never seen anything like it before, except on TV. I knew what was right away. I put my cigarettes back in my pants and told Kirtax one. She walked down the walk and took hold of my hand. The limo door opened, and Reggie Whitmore got out. So I had an excellent mask in one hand but he didn't need it, at least not then. He stepped after her. A tall man, not as tall as you, Mike, but tall. Wearing a gray suit and black shoes as shiny as mirrors."

She passed thinking her cigarette rose had hit her mouth and ran back to wait the arm of a chair. I lit it up in the new kitchen light.

At first he didn't say anything. The woman tried to take his arm and help him climb the three or four steps from the road to the walk, but he shook her off. He got to where we were standing under his own power, although I could hear him waddling way down deep in his chest. It was the sound a machine makes when it needs oil. I don't know how much he can walk now, but it's probably not much. Those few steps pretty well did him in, and that was almost a year ago. He looked at me for a second or two, then bent forward with his big, bony old hands on his knees. He looked at Kyra and she looked up at him.

Yes, I could see it—except not in color, not in an image like a photograph. I saw it as a woodcut, just one more harsh illustration from *Graveyard Book*. The little girl looks up wide-eyed at the rich old man—once a boy who went triumpantly sliding on a stolen sled, now at the other end of his life and just one more bag of bones. In my imagining, he was wearing a hooded jacket and Devore's grandpa mask was slightly askew, allowing me to see the tufted wolf pelt beneath. What big eyes you have, Grandpa, what a big nose you have, Grandpa, what big teeth you have, too.

He picked her up. I don't know how much effort it cost him, but he did. And—the oddest thing—Kira herself let be picked up. He was a complete stranger to her, and old people always seem to scare little children, but she let him pick her up. 'Do you know who I am?' he asked her. She shook her head, but the way she was looking at him—it was as if she *almost* knew. 'Do you think that's possible?'

"Yes."

He said, 'I'm your grandpa.' And I almost grabbed her back, Mike, because I had this crazy idea . . . I don't know.

"That he was going to eat her up?"

Her cigarette paused in front of her mouth. Her eyes were round. 'How do you know that? How *can* you know that?'

Because in my mind's eye it looks like a fairy tale. Little Red Riding Hood and the Old Gray Wolf. What did he do then?'

Ate her up with his eyes. Since then he's taught her to play checkers and Candy and Lard, board games. She's only three, but he's taught her to add and subtract. She has her own room at Warrington's and her own

the computer in it, and God knows what he's taking out of it. I don't think that's what that first time he brought me here was all about. I've never seen a look I've ever seen in my life.

And she looked back. It couldn't have been a reflection of her own secret, but it seemed like it ever. Then he tried to tell her a joke. "See. He's used up all his strength and he's going to let it all go. He's not taking it. I think he would have dropped it if he didn't want it."

He staggered a little, and Rogett. "Why're you going to let it go?" he said. That was when he took the oxygen mask from her, and he was still here, but he was attached to it in an elastic, and put it on his own face. And he said, "A couple of deep breaths and it seems like I'm all right again." He gave it back to Rogett, and he was still here, but he was still here. He said, "I've been here, haven't I?" He said, "Yes, sir. I think you have." He gave me a look, very black, when I said that. I think that he'd been even five years younger, he might have said me for it.

"But he wasn't and he didn't."

No. He said, "I want to go inside. Will you help me, please?" I said, "I would." We went up the mortuary steps with Rogett, and he was still here, but he was still here, and Kyra walking along behind. I felt sort of like a barefoot. It wasn't a very nice feeling. When we got into the vestment, he sat down to catch his breath and take a little more oxygen. Rogett turned to Kyra. "I think that woman's got a story to tell. It reminds me of some painting or other."

"*The Cry?* The one by Munch?"

I'm pretty sure that's the one. She dropped her cigarette, she smoked it all the way down to the center, and stepped into the ground into the bony, rock-riddled ground with one white socker. But he wasn't scared of her. Not then, not later. She better wait. Kyra and said, "What rhymes with *back*?" and Kyra said, "She's a *back*." Even at two she loved rhymes. Rogett came in and into the vestment brought out a Hershey's Kiss. Ki looked at me to see if I had seen it, and I said, "A fright, but just one, and I'll not want to see it on your dress." Ki popped it into her mouth and said, "I think they'd been friends since forever."

By then Devore had his breath back, but he looked tired. The most

red man I've ever seen. He reminded me of something in the Bible, about how, in the days of our old age, we say we have no pleasure in them. My heart kind of broke for him. Maybe he saw it, because he reached for my hand. He said, "Don't shut me out." And at that moment I could see Lance on his face. I started to cry. I said, "I won't unless you make me."

I could see them there in the funeral home's foyer, him sitting, her standing, the little girl looking on in wide-eyed puzzlement as she sucked the sweet Hershey's Kiss. Canned organ music in the background. Poor old Max Devore had been crafty enough on the day of his son's viewing, I thought. "Don't shut me out, indeed."

I tried to say you off and when that didn't work I upped the stakes and tried to go the other way. When that also failed I let him see that you and he and my granddaddy did share on the dirt. I was damn sure he'd be scared. I'm the red one who's been here when he put that rock in the back and didn't shut me out. Mattie, I'm just a poor old geezer, so don't shut me out.

"I was stupid, wasn't I?"

"You expected him to be better than he was. It's that makes you stupid, Mattie, the world could use more of it."

"I did have my doubts," she said. "It's why I wouldn't take any of his money, and by last October he'd quit asking. But I let him see her. I suppose, yeah, part of it was the idea there might be something in it for K later on, but I honestly didn't think about that so much. Mostly it was him being her only blood link to her father. I wanted her to enjoy that the way any kid enjoys having a grandparent. What I didn't want was for her to be infected by all the crap that went on before Lance died."

At first it seemed to be working. Then, little by little, things changed. I realized that K didn't like her white poppa's so much, for one thing. Her feelings about Reggie are the same, but Max Devore's started to make her nervous in some way I don't understand and she can't explain. I asked her once if he'd ever touched her anywhere that made her feel funny. I showed her the places I meant, and she said no. I believe her, but he said something or did something. I'm a mess out of it.

Could be no more than the sound of his breathing getting worse. I said, "That alone might be enough to scare a child. Or maybe he had some kind of spell while she was there. What about you, Mattie?"

I always used to think—and off they'd go. Come seven in the evening or eight in the morning, the BMW would pull in right where your car's parked now. You could set your clock by the woman. But I got worried.

That they might get tired of the legal process and just snatch her? This seemed to me a reasonable concern—so reasonable I could hardly believe Mattie had ever let her little girl go to the old man in the first place. In custody cases, as in the rest of life, possession tends to be nine tenths of the law, and if Mattie was telling the truth about her past and present, a custody hearing was apt to turn into a tiresome production even for the rich Mr. Devore. Snatching might, in the end, look like a more efficient solution.

Not exactly," she said. "I guess it's the logical thing, but that wasn't really it. I just got afraid. There was nothing I could put my finger on. It would get to be quarter past six in the evening and I'd think, 'This time that white-haired bitch isn't going to bring her back. This time she's going to . . .'"

I waited. When nothing came I said, "Going to what?"

"I told you, I don't know," she said. "But I've been afraid for Kyra's neckspring. By the time June came around, I couldn't stand it anymore, and I put a stop to the visits. Kyra's been off-and-on pissed at me ever since. I'm pretty sure that's most of what that Fourth of July escapade was about. She doesn't talk about her grandtather very much, but she's always popping it with 'What do you think the white nana's doing now, Mattie?' or 'Do you think the white nana would like my new dress?' Or she'd run up to me and say 'Sing, ring, king, thing, and ask for a treat.'"

"What was the reaction from Devore?"

"Complete fury. He called again and again, first asking what was wrong, then making threats."

"Physical threats?"

"Custody threats. He was going to take her away when he was finished with me. I distanced her to the white world as an aunt mother. I didn't have a chance, my only hope was to relent and *let her see her goddammit*."

I nodded. "Please don't shut me out. Doesn't sound like the guy who called while I was watching the fireworks, but that does

BAG OF BONES

"I've also gotten calls from Dick. Once I found out about the book, she said. In a way, I guess I regretted I ate her book. I said I wasn't being true to Lance's memory."

"What about George Footman?"

"He cruises by once in a while. Lets me know how well he's doing. He's either stopped in. You asked about past visits, right? Just seeing Footman's cruiser on my road feels like a physical treatment. He's not here. But these days it seems as if everything does."

"Even though Kyra's visits have stopped."

"Even though. It feels—exhausting. Like something's going to happen. And every day that feeling seems to get stronger."

"John Storrow's number," I said. "Do you want it?"

She sat quietly, looking into her lap. Then she raised her head and nodded. "Gave it to me. And thank you. From the bottom of my heart."

I had the number on a pink memo card in my front pocket. She grasped it but did not immediately take it. Our fingers were touching, and she was looking at me with a shimmering steadiness. It was as if she knew more about my motives than I did myself.

"What can I do to repay you?" she asked, and there it was.

"Tell Storrow everything you've told me. I'll get out the pink slip and stand up. That'll do just fine. And now I have to eat. Will you call and tell me how you made out with him?"

"Of course."

We walked to my car. I turned to her when we got there. For a moment I thought she was going to put her arms around me and tag me, a thank-you gesture that might have led anywhere, to or even more—me so heightened, it was almost melodramatic. But it was a mild, dramatic situation, a fairy tale where there's good and bad, even a lot of repressed sex running under both.

Then headlights appeared over the brow of the road where the street stood and swept past the All-Purpose Garage. They moved forward, brightening. Mattie stood back and carefully put her hands behind her like a child who has been scolded. They disappeared again, as if they were again—but the moment had passed, it was. It had been a visit.

"Thanks for dinner," I said. "It was wonderful."

"Thanks for the lawyer, I'm sure he'll be wonderful, too," she said, and we both laughed. The electricity went out of the air. "He spoke of you once, you know Devore."

I looked at her in surprise. I'm amazed he even knew who I was. Before this, I mean."

He knows, all right. He spoke of you with what I think was genuine affection."

"You're kidding. You must be."

I'm not. He said that your great-grandfather and his great grandfather worked the same camps and were neighbors when they weren't in the woods. I think he said not far from where Boyd's Marina is now. They sat in the same pit. 'Is the way he put it. Charming, isn't? He said he guessed that if a couple of loggers from the TR could produce millionaires, the system was working the way it was supposed to. Even if it took three generations to do it, he said. At the time I took it as a veiled criticism of Lance."

It's ridiculous, as well as he meant it. I said. My family is from the coast. Prout's Neck. Other side of the state. My dad was a fisherman and so was his father before him. My great-grandfather, too. They trapped lobsters and threw nets, they didn't cut trees. All that was true, and yet my mind tried to fix on something. Some memory connected to what she was saying. Perhaps if I slept on it, it would come back to me.

Could he have been talking about someone in your wife's family?"

Nope. There are Arlens in Maine—they're a big family—but most are still in Massachusetts. They do all sorts of things now, but if you go back to the eighteen-eighties, the majority would have been quarrymen and stone cutters in the Maiden-Lynn area. Devore was pulling your leg, Mattie. But even then I suppose I knew he wasn't. He might have gotten some part of the story wrong—even the sharpest guys begin to lose the edge of their recollection by the time they turn eighty-five—but Max Devore wasn't much of a leg-puller. I had an image of unseen cables stretching beneath the surface of the earth here on the TR—stretching in all directions, unseen but very powerful.

My hand was resting on top of my car door, and now she touched it

dark version—Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. But then Bartleby begins to question even work, the god of middle-class American males.

She looked excited now, and I thought it was a shame she'd missed her last year of high school. For her, and also for her teachers. "That's why he starts saying 'I prefer not to!'"

Yes. Think of Bartleby as a hot air balloon. Only one rope still tethered him to the earth, and that rope is his scribbling. We can measure the rot in that last rope by the steadily increasing number of things Bartleby prefers not to do. Finally the rope breaks and Bartleby floats away. It's a goddam disturbing story, isn't it?"

One night I dreamed about him," she said. "I opened the trailer door and there he was, sitting on the steps in his old black suit. Thin. Not much hair. I said, 'Will you move, please? I have to go out and hang the clothes now.' And he said, 'I prefer not to.' Yes. I guess you could call it disturbing."

Then it still works, I said, and got into my car. "Call me. Tell me how it goes with John Storrows."

"I will. And anything I can do to repay, just ask."

John How young did you have to be—how beautifully ignorant, to issue that kind of blank check?

My window was open. I reached through it and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, and hard.

"You miss your wife a lot, don't you?" she said.

"It shows?"

Sometimes—she was no longer squeezing, but she was still holding my hand. When you were reading to Ki, you looked both happy and sad at the same time. I only saw her once, your wife, but I thought she was very beautiful."

I had been thinking about the touch of her hands, concentrating on that. Now I forgot about it entirely. "When did you see her? And where? Do you remember?"

She smiled as if these were very silly questions. "I remember. It was at the ballfield, on the night I met my husband."

Very slowly I withdrew my hand from hers. So far as I knew, neither John nor I had been near TR 90 all that summer of '94—but what I

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knew was apparently wrong. It felt like I was at a funeral in July. She had even gone to the softball game.

"Are you sure it was Joe?" I asked.

Mattie was looking off toward her father, but she was looking thinking about how all I have for the house and for her is a mess, either lot. It was Lance. Mattie said it was a mess, a mess, a mess. Then she probably wouldn't look at Joe, and she probably wouldn't had much control of my expression either. She probably wouldn't on my face than I wanted to show.

Yes, she said. I was standing with Joe and Mattie and Joe said this was after Lance helped me with a leg, and I had a leg, and then asked if I was going to pizza with the rest of the team that game. And Joe said, "Look, it's Mrs. Nookin. In the house. She's the writer's wife. Mattie said that too. He said, 'The house was covered with blue roses.'"

I remembered it very well. I'd like it because it was a look, a look, not blue roses, not in nature, and not in culture. One woman was wearing it, she had thrown her arms extravagantly, and she was swooned her hips forward against me, and then she was a blue rose, and I must strike her, and she turned pale. Remembering that hurt, and badly.

She was over on the third-base side, behind the bases, and she said, "Mattie said, 'with some guy who was wearing an orange jacket with patches on the elbows. They were laughing together over something, and then she turned her head a little and looked at me. She was quiet for a moment, standing there by herself, and then she crossed. She raised her hair off the back of her neck, and then she let it drop again."

Right at me. Really seeing me. And she had a look about her. She's just been laughing, but this look was sad, somehow. It was as if she knew me. Then the guy put his arm around her waist and she walked away.

Silence except for the crickets and the sound of a car. A truck. Mattie only stood there for a moment, as if looking at her, and then she felt something and looked back at me.

"Is something wrong?"

No. Except who was this guy with his arm around me?

She laughed a little uncertainly. "Well I doubt if he was her boyfriend, you know. He was quite a bit older—fifty, at least. *Surely not*." I thought I maybe it was forty, but that didn't mean I had missed the way Mattie moved inside her dress, or lifted her hair from the nape of her neck. "I mean . . . you're kidding, right?"

I didn't really know. There's a lot of things I don't know these days, it seems. But the lady's dead in any case, so how can it matter?"

Mattie was looking distressed. "If I put my foot in something, Mike, I'm sorry."

"Who *was* the man? Do you know?"

She shook her head. "I thought he was a summer person—there was that feeling about him, maybe just because he was wearing a jacket on a hot summer evening—but if he was, he wasn't staying at Warrington's. I knew most of them."

"And they walked off together?"

"Yes." Sounding reluctant.

"Toward the parking lot?"

"Yes. More reluctant still. And this time she was lying. I knew it with a queer certainty that went far beyond intuition; it was almost like mind-reading.

I reached through the window and took her hand again. "You said if I could think of anything you could do to repay me, to just ask. I'm asking. Tell me the truth, Mattie."

She bit her lip, looking down at my hand lying over hers. Then she looked up at my face. He was a banty guy. The old sportcoat made him look a little like a college professor, but he could have been a carpenter for all I know. His hair was black. He had a tan. They had a laugh together, a good one, and then she looked at me and the laugh went out of her face. After that he put an arm around her and they walked away. She paused. Not toward the parking lot, though. Toward The Street."

The Street. From there they could have walked north along the edge of the lake until they came to Sara Laugis. And then? Who knew?

She never told me she came down here that summer, I said.

Mattie seemed to try several responses and find none of them to her

* * *

When I got back to Sara, the fruit and vegetable magnets on the refrigerator were in a circle again. Three letters had been clustered in the middle

g d
o

I moved the *o* up to where I thought it belonged, making 'god' or maybe an admitted version of 'good.' Which meant exactly what? "I could speculate about that, but I prefer not to," I told the empty house. I looked at Bunter the moose, willing the bell around his moth-eaten neck to ring. When it didn't, I opened my two new Magnabot packages and stuck the letters on the fridge door, spreading them out. Then I went down to the north wing, undressed, and brushed my teeth.

As I bared my fangs for the mirror in a sadsy cartoon scowl, I considered calling Ward Hinkins again tomorrow morning. I could tell him that my search for the elusive past cows had progressed from November of 1925 to July of 1925. What meetings had Jo put on her calendar for that month? What excuses to be out of Derry? And once I had finished with Ward, I could tackle Jo's friend Bonnie Amadson, ask her if anything had been going on with Jo in the last summer of her life.

Let us rest tonight, say I at last. It was the UFO voice. *What you will find is that it is not a coincidence. I am on my way out to the TR after one of our board members says not to do that but it will prove to be a coincidence. The best of a bite of dinner. Just dinner.*

Do I never find me? I asked the UFO voice, spitting out a mouthful of toothpaste and then rinsing. *Not until you're older.*

Has it ever been the heart? the voice returned, and that froze me in the act of putting my toothbrush back in the medicine cabinet. The UFO voice had a point. I had been deep into *Little Women* for a long time. July of '91. Jo could have come in and told me she'd seen Lon Chaney Junior dancing with the queen, doing the Werewolves of London, and I probably would have said, Uh-huh, honey, that's nice—as I went on proofing copy.

Bullshit. I said to my reflection. That's just bullshit.

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[illegible]

And as I leave, I think of a great thing I could do: sit at a desk in Amundson's office, as a friend, for an hour or two. Become a part of a statute of limitations and let him tell me any secret he wants to tell me.

The bottom line was as simple as it was brutal. I was four or five dead. Best to overbait and let all the maggots go, as I had no way of getting rid of water directly from the top, so I cut them off at the mouth, and spat it out.

When I returned to the kitchen to set the table, I saw a new message in a new circle of magnets. It read

blue rose liar ha ha

I looked at it for a second or two, wondering what it was for, and why.

Wondering if it was true

I stretched out a hand and sought to take the stars, as I was wont to do. I went to bed.

CHAPTER

13

I caught the measles when I was eight, and I was very ill. I thought we were going to die, my father told me once, and he was not a man given to exaggeration. He told me about how he and my mother had dunked me in a tub of cold water one night, both of them at least half-convicted the shock of it would stop my heart, but both of them completely convinced that I'd bury up before their eyes if they didn't do *something*. I had begun to speak in a loud, monotonously discursive voice about the bright figures I saw in the room—angels come to bear me away, my terrified mother was sure—and the last time my father took my temperature before the cold plunge, he said that the mercury on the old Johnson & Johnson rectal thermometer had stood at a hundred and six degrees. After that, he said, he didn't dare take it anymore.

I don't remember any bright figures, but I remember a strange period of time that was like being in a *fantascope*—a room where several different movies were showing at once. The world grew elastic, bulging in places where it had never bulged before, wavering in places where it had always seemed flat. People—most of them seeming impossibly tall—darted in and out of my room on scissoring, cartoonish legs. Their words all came

there was a guitar solo. Son Tidwell playing that chicken-scratch thing.

Lights gleamed in the dark, and I thought of a song from the fifties. Claudine Clark singing "Party Lights." And here they were, Japanese lanterns hung from the trees above the path of a broad tie steps leading from the house to the water. Party lights casting mystic circles of radiance in the dark: red, blue, and green.

Behind me, Sara was singing the bridge to her Manderley song: *mama likes it nasty, mama likes it strong, mama likes to party all night long*. But it was fading. Sara and the Red Top Boys had set up their bandstand in the driveway by the sound, about where George Footman had parked when he came to serve me with Max Devore's subpoena. I was descending toward the lake through circles of radiance, past party lights surrounded by soft-winged motifs. One had found its way inside a lamp, and it cast a monstrous, batlike shadow against the robed paper. The flower-boxes Jo had put beside the steps were full of night-blooming roses. In the light of the Japanese lanterns they looked blue.

Now the band was only a faint murmur. I could hear Sara shouting out the lyric, laughing her way through it as though it were the funniest thing she'd ever heard, and that Manderley-sanderley-canderley stuff, but I could no longer make out the individual words. Much clearer was the lap of the lake against the rocks at the foot of the steps, the hollow clunk of the canisters under the swimming float, and the cry of a loon drifting out of the darkness. Someone was standing on The Street to my right, at the edge of the lake. I couldn't see his face, but I could see the brown sport coat and the tee-shirt he was wearing beneath it. The lapels cut off some of the letters of the message, so it looked like this:

ORMA

ER

OUN

I knew what it said anyway. In dreams you almost always know, don't you? *NORMAL SPIRIT COUNT*. A Village Cafe yack it up special if ever there was one.

I was in the north bedroom dreaming all this, and here I woke up.

'You're not Jo,' I said. "Who are you?"

But no one was there to answer. I was in the woods. It was dark, and on the lake the loons were crying. I was walking the path to Jo's studio. It wasn't a dream. I could feel the cool air against my skin and the occasional bite of a rock into my bare sole or heel. A mosquito buzzed around my ear and I waved it away. I was wearing Jockey shorts, and at every step they pulled against a huge and throbbing erection.

What the hell is this? I asked as Jo's little baraboard studio loomed in the dark. I looked behind me and saw Sara on her alf, not the woman but the house—a long lodge jutting toward the neighborhood lake. "What's happening to me?"

Everything's all right, Mike, Jo said. She was standing on the float, watching as I swam toward her. She put her hands behind her neck like a slender model, lifting her breasts more fully into the damp halter. As in the photo, I could see her nipples poking out the cloth. I was swimming in my underpants, and with the same huge erection.

Everything's all right, Mike, Mattie said in the north bedroom, and I opened my eyes. Sae was sitting beside me on the bed, smooth and naked in the weak glow of the nightlight. Her hair was down, hanging to her shoulders. Her breasts were tiny—the size of teacups—but the nipples were large and distended. Between her legs, where my hand still lingered, was a powerpuff of blonde hair, smooth as down. Her body was wrapped in shadows like moth-wings, like rose-petals. There was something desperately attractive about her as she sat there—she was like the prize you know you'll never win at the carnieshooting gallery or the county fair ringtoss. The one they keep on the top shelf. She reached under the sheet and folded her fingers over the stretched material of my undershorts.

For a moment, I asked if what happened at the lake and here—said the UFO voice as I climbed the steps to my wife's studio. I stooped, fished for the key from beneath the mat, and took it out.

I climbed the ladder to the float, wet and dripping, preceded by my engorged sex—staring anything I wonder so unintentionally comic as a sexually aroused man? Jo stood on the boards in her wet bathing suit. I pulled Mattie into bed with me. I opened the door to Jo's studio. All of

was taking her corpse. Nor could even that realization stop me. Who was he? I cried at her, covering her cold flesh as it lay on the wet boards. Who was he, Jo? For Christ's sake tell me who he was.

In the north bedroom I pulled Mattie on top of me, relishing the feel of those small breasts against my chest and the length of her entwining legs. Then I rolled her over on the far side of the bed. I felt her hand reaching for me, and slapped it away. If she touched me where she meant to touch me, I would come in an instant. "Spread your legs, hurry," I said, and she did. I closed my eyes, shutting out all other sensory input in favor of this. I pressed forward, then stopped. I made one little adjustment, pushing at my engorged penis with the side of my hand, then rolled my hips and slipped into her like a finger in a silk-lined glove. She looked up at me, wide-eyed, then put a hand on my cheek and turned my head. "Everything out there is death," she said, as if only explaining the obvious. In the window I saw Fifth Avenue between Fifty-ninth and Sixty-ninth—all those trendy shops, Brian and Barry, Tiffany and Bergdorf's and Stephen Glass. And here came Harold Oblowski, northbound and swinging his pigskin briefcase—the one Jo and I had given him for Christmas the year before she died. Beside him, carrying a Barnes and Noble bag by the handles, was the countifful, beautiful Nola, his secretary. Except her bounty was gone. This was a grinning, yellow-jawed skeleton in a Donna Karan suit and alligator pumps, scrawny, beringed bones instead of fingers gripped the bag-handles. Harold's teeth, uttered in his usual agent's grin, now extended to the point of ossification. His favorite suit, the double-breasted charcoal gray from Paul Stuart, flapped on him like a sail in a fresh breeze. All around them, on both sides of the street, walked the living dead—mommy mummies, carrying baby corpses by the hands or wheeling them in expensive prams; zombie doormen, reanimated skateboarders. Here a tall black man with a last few strips of flesh hanging from his face like catgut ductwork walked his skeletal Alsatian. The cab-drivers were not playing rag music. The faces looking down from the passing buses were skulls, each wearing its own version of Harold's grin. *His head ate rat crowns on Fifth Ave., he killed me, and my and books later.* The peanut vendors were putrefying. Yet none of it could quench me. I was on fire. I

B. A. O. J. 10/10/15

supposedly a very powerful attack on the rape pattern I saw with mothers was a "rape pattern." I thought mothers to keep me from becoming a mother, to keep my breasts away from my child, I could not have been a mother. I started to feel "You know, I don't know." My mother was my mother, it did not mean that I was not a mother. I was not understood it. "Tell me, you bitch."

On the path between the street and the yard, I saw the typewriter on a table with a lamp, and a woman sitting below its light, busily writing. I had no time to look at her for the night breeze. Then I found myself in a dark place, as if shrouded; there was behind me a cold darkness, and I thought I was judged by a brazen smoke-broken light that could see through me. A woman I didn't see me, and I that could not see her. The typewriter was there, was still there, and the woman was brown, it squeezed slowly together, the air was cold.

What do you want to know sugar? she asked from the car. Still laughing. Still teasing. Do you really want to know what I do want to know or do you want to feel?'

On you're killing me! I feel like a boxer, then, as punches of IBM Screens—was shaken back and forth in my seat, like my muscles twanging like guitar strings.

David wanted to know what was going on. The answer is
I had my first fall. I screamed. So loud that even the cats' laughter that was almost like a cough and squeezed me where the squeezing was best.

You hold still now," she said. "You're still a little nervous. I want you to raise your right arm, and then your left arm, and then I'll let the rest of the whole world expand around you. See, it's not so strong that I thought it would suddenly turn you out. I suppose I had luck, like certain strong people have, and that's why I was so strong. I screamed, I hurt myself, but I got away from the doctor."

At the same time I was in the East. I was in England for 11 or 12 years, but the sense of the world – Sahara, the Sudan, the West Indies – was strong through a Black Mountain key. I set out to find a way to the

and now I couldn't see the path leading up to the house, but I could discern its switchback course by the Japanese lanterns. My underpants lay beside me in a little wet heap. I picked them up and started to put them on—only because I didn't want to swim back to shore with them in my hand. I stopped with them stretched between my knees, looking at my fingers. They were smeared with decaying flesh. Puffing out from beneath several of the nails were clumps of torn-out hair. Corpsehair.

Oh Jesus, I imagined. The strength went out of me. I flopped into wetness. I was in the north wing bedroom. What I had landed in was not, as at first I thought it was, a cot. The dim glow of the nightlight showed darker stuff, however. Mattie was gone and the bed was full of blood. Lying in the middle of that soaking pool was something I at first guessed took to be a clump of flesh or a piece of organ. I looked more closely and saw it was a stuffed animal, a black-furred object matted red with blood. I lay on my side, looking at it, wanting to bolt out of the bed and flee from the room but unable to do it. My muscles were in a dead swoon. Who had I really been having sex with in this bed? And what had I done to her? In God's name, what?

I don't believe these tales. I heard myself say, and as though it were an incantation, I was slapped back together. That isn't exactly what happened, but it's the only way of saying that seems to come close to whatever did. There were three of me—one on the float, one in the north bedroom, one on the path—and each one felt that hard slap, as if the wind had grown a fist. There was rushing blackness, and in it the steady silver sacking of Hunter's coat. Then it faded, and I faded with it. For a little while I was nowhere at all.

I came back to the case. I chatter of birds on summer vacation and to that peculiar red darkness that means the sun is shining through your closed eyelids. My neck was stiff; my head was tilted at a weird angle; my legs were tilted awkwardly beneath me, and I was not.

I tilted my head with a wince, knowing even as I opened my eyes that I was no longer in bed, no longer on the swimming float, no longer on the path between the house and the studio. It was floorboards under me, hard and uncompromising.

home. It was stupid to think I had driven all the way back to Wasp Hill Road, probably wearing nothing but my Jockeys, that I had

Waste? Riped on to bed? Bought to mild rest? In my sleep?

I was a type with a type, I'd said that I? It's still the right before the old-dam hallway

But it's not a type, it's a type, they said, though the road and the mile down the road to

I wasn't going to stand out here listening to those quarrelling voices in my head. If I wasn't crazy—and I didn't think I was—listening to those contentious assholes would probably send me there, and by the express I reached out and pushed the bedroom door open.

For a moment I actually *saw* a spreading octopus pattern of blood soaking into the sheet, that's how real and focused my terror was. Then I closed my eyes tight, opened them, and looked again. The sheets were rumpled, the bottom one mostly pulled free. I could see the quilted satin hulk of the mattress. One pillow lay on the far edge of the bed. The other was slumped down at the foot. The throw rug—a piece of Jo's work—was askew, and my water glass lay overturned on the nighttable. The bedroom looked as if it might have been the site of a brawl or an orgy, but not a murder. There was no blood and no little scuffed animal with black fur.

I dropped to my knees and looked under the bed. Nothing there—not even dark knots, thanks to Brenda Meserve. I looked at the ground sheet again, first passing a hand over its rumpled topography, then pulling it back down and rescuing the elasticized corners. Great invention, these sheets, if women gave out the Medal of Freedom instead of a bunch of white-picket-fences who never make a bed or waste a load of clothes in their lives, the guy who thought up fitted sheets would undoubtedly have gotten a piece of that tin by now. In a Rose Garden ceremony.

With the sheet pulled flat I looked again. No blood, not a single drop. There was no stiffening patch of semen, either. The former I hadn't really expected, so I was already telling myself, out with about the latter. At the very least, I had the world's most creative wet-dream—a triptych in which I had screwed two women and gotten a third—*from a girl*, all at the same time. I thought I had that morning-after feeling, too, the one you get when the previous night's sex has been

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of the headbusting variety. But other than that, it's a very good burnt gunpowder!

La Jolla station most scenic. If further, please, let me know the path between here and there. Just back of La Jolla, I believe, Mr. Devore, back to Annapolis with a postscript, and a good one, too.

A part of me disagreed - part of me thought: 'After all, it was exactly what I *did* need! But I wish I had sex with *my* husband - not more than I had had sex with *my* husband. I wish I could have got it *right* and not in Sara Edwells' New World. I wish I could have nice little kids that my thoughts turned I had to have sex with. What had I gotten it? Why bother?

On men: What a silly question. Men would not tell me secrets from me, maybe even lying and that there might be a secret because there might be a hidden man behind the straw, a man that put a sharp stick into me and then break it, so there might be a secret in my own humble attack for that matter. But as a student, one of the best of sunlight looking at my shadow on the far wall, even if the light seemed to matter. I have gone out to my wilderness and gotten my own water and there was only one reason to do something like that.

I went into the bathroom, wanted to get a few swimmers out, and the dirt on my feet had been doing something else. I reached for the shower handle, then stopped. The tub was full of water. I waited for some reason, then it during my soap walk. I was so close to the door, I reached for the drain lever, then stopped again, realizing that at that moment on the shoulder of Route 98 when my car hit the tap was the taste of cold water. I realized I was waiting for it. I tapped. When it didn't, I opened the bathtub drain. It was at the stop, I turned and started the shower.

I could have brought the S&W the downstairs, perhaps even down to the kitchen or the deck where there was a little more room, but I couldn't face it the way that I didn't. I had brought it to the way that I did, and my office and my office was where I had to go to work. I had to work in there even if the temperature was a little too hot, but I had to go to work and twenty feet or so when I was in the office, it was a little better.

STEPHEN KING

The paper rolled into the machine was an old pink-carbon receipt from Click's, the photo shop in Castle Rock where Jo had bought her supplies when we were down here. I'd put it in so that the blank side faced the Courier type ball. On it I had typed the names of my little norem, as if I had tried in some straggling way to report on my three faceted dream even while it was going on.

Jo Sara Mattis Jo Sara Mattie Mattie Mattie Sara Sara
Jo Johanna Sara Jo MattieSaraJo

Below this, in lower case,

normal sperm count sperm norm all's rosy

I opened the office door, carried the typewriter in, and put it in its old place beneath the poster of Richard Nixon. I pulled the pink slip out of the roller, unrolled it up, and tossed it into the wastebasket. Then I picked up the Selectrics play and stuck it in the baseboard socket. My heart was beating hard, just the way it had when I was thirteen and climbing the ladder to the high board at the Y pool. I had climbed that ladder three times when I was twelve, and then slunk back down it again, once I turned thirteen, there could be no chickening out—I really had to do it.

I thought I'd seen a fan hiding in the far corner of the closet, behind the box marked CATFISH. I started in that direction, then turned around again with a ragged little laugh. I'd had moments of confidence before, hadn't I? Yes. And then the iron bands had clamped around my chest. It would be stupid to get out the fan and then discover I had no business in this room after all.

Take it easy, I said, take it easy. But I couldn't, no more than that narrow, chested boy in the ridiculous purple bathing suit had been able to take it easy when he waded to the end of the diving board, the pool so green below him, the upraised faces of the boys and girls in it so small, so *small*.

I booted one of the drawers on the right side of the desk and pulled so hard it came all the way out. I got my bare foot out of its lancing zone

BAG OF BONDS

just in time, and I walked against the cold breeze as I left the house. I had a ream of paper for the letter. The first day I wrote it, the paper got wet when it was raining, so I had to wait until it was dry before I remembered the details of the conversation. I was so fresh that this letter, which it was so long ago, is still as fresh as the day I wrote it. It took several tries to get it into the box, and I was so

At last I sat down in my desk chair. I turned the screen to my right, took my weight and the same. I reached for the mouse, moved it forward, snagging my legs into the knee hole. Then I sat back on my keyboard, sweating hard, still remembering the night I sat at the Yates space. I had been under my bare feet as I walked to school, remembering the quality of the voices below me, remembering the sound of the rain on the stretch low tumb of the air exchangers. I had been under the water if the water had its own secret heart, as I had stood at the edge of the wading, and not for the first time, not for the last, I had been under the water wrong. Probably not yet over the edge of the world, as I had documented cases of that in *Riptide*. But it had been a new experience between the ages of eight and fourteen.

Collected, this time it was said that it was a *Myiarchus cinerascens*.

I reached for the IBM's reset switch, now a mere push button, and had dropped my Word Six program at the Power Systems Control *bye, old pal*, I had thought.

"Please let this work," I said. "Please."

I lowered my hand and flicked the switch. The room was dark. The Courtenhall did a prenoon yawp twice, then a low, throaty roar. The wings waiting to go in. I picked up a pencil, pressed it against the fingers were leaving in my armpit, and at last I wrote the word *centered*. I centered it, then wrote

Chapter One

and waited for the storm to break

CHAPTER

14

The ringing of the phone—or, more accurately, the way I *recalled* the ringing of the phone—was as familiar as the creaks of my chair or the hum of the old IBM Selectric. It seemed to come from far away at first, then to approach like a whistling train coming down on a crossing.

There was no extension in my office or Jo's; the upstairs phone, an old-fashioned rotary dial, was on a table in the hall between them—in what Jo used to call "no-man's-land." The temperature out there must have been at least ninety degrees, but the air still felt cool on my skin after the office. I was so drenched with sweat that I looked like a slightly pot-bellied version of the muscle-boys I sometimes saw when I was working out.

"Hello?"

"Mae? Did I wake you? Were you sleeping?" It was Mattie, but a different one from last night. This one wasn't afraid or even tentative; this one sounded so happy she was almost bubbling over. It was almost certainly the Mattie who had attracted Lance Devore.

"Not sleeping," I said. "Writing a little."

"Get out! I thought you were retired."

"I thought so too," I said. "Let's see if I can get a few more going on? You sound over the moon."

"I just got off the phone with John Storrow."

Really? How long had I been waiting for that? I'd been waiting for my wrist and skin to stop itching for weeks. I'd been waiting for the sky to crack open so I could say what I wanted. I'd been waiting for stories to be worth listening to, for people to be worth talking to, for my overturned night-glass.

"His age, and that he can subpoena the other son?"

"Whoa," I said. "You lost me. Go back and slow down."

She did. Telling them the news about taking on the case. Storrow was coming up tomorrow. He would land at Cedar. An entire stay at the Duckfoot Rock Hotel in Cedar Valley. Storrow would spend most of his day discussing the case. On the afternoon of the next day, she said, "I go with you to your apartment. I'll know what Lewiston."

It was a dead goal, but what a terrific relief. More than my feelings was that Mattie had recovered her wit, enough to tell us, on the next day still morning, the night coming in the winter air, the prosecutor's conditional suggested that if it was not what it seemed, I would. I hadn't realized how glossy my thirty-year-old woman's hair, how tidy white sneakers had been. How far I went to wear it, how I would lose her child.

"This is great. I'm so glad, Mattie."

And yes, of it. If you were here, it'd be a good idea to know what you ever had."

"He told you you could win, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you believe him?"

Yes. Then her face dropped with the news that she had lost when I told him I had a doctor's appointment to see him.

"No," I said. "I didn't think he would be."

I told him we were in the year of the case. I was sure I'd be sitting together for sixty seconds to start the gossip."

"I'd say he's got an insultingly low opinion of Yankee lovin', I said, 'but of course he's from New York.'"

She laughed harder than my little joke warranted, I thought. Out of semi-hysterical relief that she now had a couple of protectors? Because the whole subject of sex was a tender one for her just now? Best not to speculate.

He didn't paddle me too hard about it, but he made it clear that he would if we did it again. When this is over, though, I'm having you for a special meal. We'll have everything you like, just the way you like it."

Everyth'g you like, just the way you like it. And she was, by God and Sonny Jesus, completely unaware that what she was saying might have another meaning. I would have bet on it. I closed my eyes for a moment, smiling. Why not smile? Everyth'g she was saying sounded absolutely great, especially once you cleared the confines of Michael Newman's dirty mind. It sounded like we might have the expected fairy-tale ending, if we could keep our courage and hold our course. And if I could restrain myself from making a pass at a girl young enough to be my daughter—outside of my dreams, that was. If I couldn't, I probably deserved whatever I got. But Kyra wouldn't. She was the hood ornament in all this, claimed to go wherever the car took her. If I got any of the wrong ideas, I'd do well to remember that

"If the judge sends Devore home empty-handed, I'll take you out to Rent-a-Nights in Portland and buy you a nine-course of French chow. I said. Sterno, too. I'll even spring for the legal beagle I'm dating on Friday. So who's better than me, huh?"

"No one, I know," she said, sounding serious. "I'll pay you back for this Mike. I'm down now, but I won't always be down. If it takes me the rest of my life, I'll pay you back."

"Mattie, you don't have to—"

But she said with quiet venomance: "I do. And I have to do something else today, too."

What's that? I've got a beating act's should be way she did this morning—so happy and free like a prisoner who has just been pardoned and let out of a— but a read. I was looking longingly at the door to my office. I couldn't do much more today. I'd end up baked like an apple if

BAG OF BONES

There, but I was, do not repeat it, I was. Do not
 but I was, do not repeat it, I was. Do not

That's why Kyrle, on the occasion of her first trip to Wild Mart, showed little interest in the various "new" and "old" folk remedies for working in the mine. "I'd rather be out of the mine the other way."

I just had a vision. I said I knew they were at the airport. I knew they were even in my head.

'Huh?' Sounding startled and doubtful.

I said bring me back, I said the wires are cut, the wire before I even knew they were there

'Maybe I will,' she said, sounding amused. Then her tone grew serious again. 'And if I said anything last night that made you angry even for a minute, I'm sorry. I never for the world.'

Don't worry, I said. I'm not a baby. A little, at least. I was, in fact, I'd pretty much forgotten and I was not sure. And I did for what seemed to me to be a good cause.

That's probably the best I won't keep you from making it. It's what you want to do, isn't it?

I was startled. "What makes you say that?"

[illegible]

Perhaps sometimes giants were alive, and the old ones came from their bones, jerks, impulses flitting across the sky from the mid, spooks from low places.

"Mattie? Still there?"

Save, count, buy, and write notes — www.OrganizeIt.com — you need from John Storrow."

"If you don't stay in touch, I'll be pissed at you. Royal.ly."

Mike. And thanks again. So much."

[illegible]

fashioned Bakelite phone handset after she had hung up. She'd call and keep me updated, but not when I was working. How would she know when that was? She just would. As I'd known last night that she was lying when she said Jo and the man with the elbow patches on the sleeves of his sportcoat had walked off toward the parking lot. Mattie had been wearing a pair of white snorts and a halter top when she called me, no dress or skirt required today because it was Wednesday and the library was closed on Wednesday.

You don't know any of that, You're just making it up.

But I wasn't. If I'd been making it up, I probably would have put her in something a little more suggestive—a Merry Widow from Victor's Secret, perhaps.

That thought called up another *Do what you want* they had said. Both of them. *Do what you want.* And that was a line I knew. While on Key Largo I'd read an *Atlantic Monthly* essay on pornography by some feminist. I wasn't sure which one—only that it hadn't been Naomi Wolf or Camille Paglia. This woman had been of the conservative stripe, and she had used that phrase. Sally Tisdale, maybe. Or was my mind just creating echo distortions of Sara Tidwell? Whoever it had been, she'd claimed that 'do what I want' was the basis of erotica which appealed to women and 'do what you want' was the basis of pornography which appealed to men. Women imagine speaking the former line in sexual situations, men imagine having the latter line spoken to them. And, the writer went on, when real world sex goes bad—sometimes turning violent, sometimes shameful, sometimes just unsuccessful from the female partner's point of view—porn is often the uninvited co-conspirator. The man is apt to round on the woman angrily and cry, 'You wanted me to! Quit lying and admit it! You *wanted* me to!'

The writer claimed it was what every man hoped to hear in the bedroom. Do what you want. Bite me, sodomize me, lick between my toes, drink wine out of my navel, give me a hairbrush in the ass, raise your ass for me to padle—it doesn't matter. Do what you want. The door is closed and we are here, but really, only *you* are here. I am just a willing extension of your fantasies and only *you* are here. I have no wants of my own, no needs of my own, no taboos. Do what you want to this shadow, this fantasy, this ghost.

went in that direction. Also, they have reasons to steer clear of the sex angle. Their focus is on Mattie as neglected, and perhaps abusive. Proving that Mom isn't a man quit working around the time *Kramer vs. Kramer* came out in the movie theaters. Nor is that the only problem they have with the issue. He now sounded positively gleeful.

"Tell me."

Max Devore is eighty-five and divorced. Twice divorced, in point of fact. Before awarding custody to a single man of his age, secondary custody has to be taken into consideration. It is, in fact, the single most important issue, other than the allegations of abuse and neglect levelled at the mother.

"What are those allegations? Do you know?"

"No. Mattie doesn't either, because they're fabrications. She's a sweetie, by the way—"

"Yeah, she is."

and, I think she's going to make a great witness. I can't wait to meet her in person. Meant me, don't sidetrack me. We're talking about secondary custody, right?"

"Right."

Devore has a daughter who has been declared mentally incompetent and lives in an institution somewhere in California. Medest. I think. Not a good bet for custody.

"It wouldn't seem so."

"The son, Roger, is . . . I heard a faint fluttering of notebook pages.

itty toat. So he's not exactly a spring chicken, either. Still, there are lots of guys who become daddies at that age nowadays. It's a brave new world. But Roger is a homosexual."

I thought of Bill Dean saying, *Rump-wrangler: Understand there's a lot of that goin' around out there in California.*

"I thought you said sex doesn't matter."

Maybe I should have said *either* sex doesn't matter. In certain states, California is one of them. *Either* sex doesn't matter, either. Or not as much. But this case isn't going to be adjudicated in California. It's going to be adjudicated in Maine, where folks are less enlightened about how well two married men—married to each other, I mean—can raise a little girl.

BAG OF BONDS

Roger D. Vetter, *On the Other Side of the River* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 240, \$19.95.

He and a sister, two daughters, Mrs. Sexton, age 29, and 20, John said. "I don't like to test a person's capacity for love and affection. But I can't see a child that I don't love. I don't know how much that will be. I don't know how to predict, but I get a chance to see a child that is a very beautiful little girl growing up with two other children. I spend most of the time in computer, it's not something that I do. What Captain Kers and Mr. Spoken might do is that I will eat in officers' country. I will get a chance to see a child."

It seems a little more, I said, I heard it as if speaking to me, a man who wants to be reassured perhaps even when he knows it didn't happen.

Of course it's mean. It feels like throwing up into the snow with a look over a couple of innocent bystanders. Roger Devereaux (Maxwell) doesn't deal drugs, neither does his boy, and he's got a hell of a good lawyer, and custody does an even better job than any court could do in making boys into insects. This one isn't as sad as it could be, but it's sad, and it's wrong, and it's *so bad*. Max Devereaux came up there to see a Hell of a lot of other boys and one rule: no one to buy a kid. This makes a good

I got tired, and had to go to a doctor who told me I was over-exercising and that I should rest. I was outside of a hotel at noon and I had to go to the hospital.

My message to Devere is going to focus on social capital, and I did last week at Probus. It's a big meeting, all day long, so it's important.

If it gets too warm, you've still got a couple of minutes to
think there's a chance Dvorak might just drop it on you.

A pretty good line, in I'd say, except that it was not the usual getting his own way. Fido's secretary, a woman, told him she was not going to know what his boss was up to, but that, after meeting with him and his lawyer, she was sure that he had managed to get past his secretary.

'Rogette Whitmore'

No, I think she's a step farther up the ladder. I haven't talked to her yet, either. But I will."

"Try either Richard Osgood or George Footman," I said. "Either of them may be able to put you in touch with Devore or Devore's chief counsel."

I'll want to talk to the Whitmore woman in any case. Men like Devore tend to grow more and more dependant on their close advisors as they grow older, and she could be a key to getting him to let this go. She could also be a headache for us. She might urge him to fight, possibly because she really thinks no one can win and possibly because she wants to watch the fur fly. Also, she might marry him."

"Marry him?"

Why not? He could have her sign a pre-nup. I could no more introduce that in court than his lawyers could go fishing for who hired Matt's lawyer—and it would strengthen his chances.

Jean: I've seen the woman. She's got to be seventy herself."

But she's a potential female player in a custody case involving a little girl, and she's a layer between old man Devore and the married gay couple. We just need to keep it in mind."

Okay. I looked at the office door again, but not so longingly. There comes a point when you're done for the day whether you want to be or not—and I thought I had reached that point. Perhaps in the evening.

The lawyer I got for your names, Romeo Bissonette. He paused. "Can that be a real name?"

"Is he from Lewiston?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

Because in Maine, especially around Lewiston, that can be a real name. Am I supposed to go see him? I didn't want to go see him. It was fifty miles to Lewiston over two line roads which would now be crawling with campers and Winnebagos. What I wanted was to go swimming and then take a long nap. A long *drumma* nap.

You don't need to. Call him and talk to him a little. He's only a safety net, really—he'll object if the questioning leaves the incident on the morning of July Fourth. About that incident you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Got it?"

"Yes."

FLAG OF BONES

That's far after the meeting and he is at least 100 miles away. The notebook pages state: "Mr. [redacted] 190 Duane Street, New York City. [redacted] may be right for the check. I'll go with Mr. [redacted]. We may want to hire a private dick."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

send them to your agent, and your agent can

"No, I said. Instruct Governor to send me a check, for a Jewish mother. How much is this going to cost me?"

Seventy-five thousand dollars in ransom—no apology, no explanation at all. With no apology in his voice, either

'Don't tell Mattie '

"All right. Are you having any fun yet, Mik."

"You know, I sort of am," I said thoughtfully.

For seventy-five grand, a husband and wife can live on a small plot of land hung up.

As I put my own piece back into its cradle, I saw a room I had never lived in for the last five years that I had never lost before.

This time the phone didn't ring, and I missed it as the woman checked out of the office, but I knew I was definitely going to find out what I saw when I hit the IBM, but the RETURN key a couple of times, and was about to give up, when I saw a next note at the bottom of the page. I'd been working on a woman's phone interrupted me. What a scary little food, I felt, but I was so glad that what little good news we got from it. I'd been working on a woman's phone interrupted me. What a scary little food, I felt, but I was so glad that what little good news we got from it. I'd been working on a woman's phone interrupted me. What a scary little food, I felt, but I was so glad that what little good news we got from it.

[NEXT Drake to Rainford Stops on the way at vegetable stand to talk to the guy who runs it and someone needs a good & colorful name Straw hat Disney World t shirt They talk about Shackelford.]

I tanned the roller until the IBM spat this page out, stuck it on top of the manuscript, and jotted a final note to myself: Call Ted Rosenkrantz about Rattford. Rosenkrantz was a retired Navy man who lived in Derry. I had employed him as a research assistant on several books, using him on one project to find out how paper was made, what the migratory habits of certain common birds were for another, a little bit about the architecture of pyramid burial rooms for a third. And it's always a little bit. I want, never the whole damn thing. As a writer, my motto has always been don't confuse me with the facts. The Arthur Hailey type of fiction is beyond me. I can't read it, let alone write it. I want to know just enough so I can be colorfully Rosie knew that, and we had always worked well together.

This time I needed to know a little bit about Florida's Rattford Prison, and what the deathhouse down there is really like. I also needed a little bit on the psychology of serial killers. I thought Rosie would probably be glad to hear from me—almost as glad as I was to finally have something to call him about.

I picked up the eight double-spaced pages I had written and tanned through them, still amazed at their existence. Had an old IBM typewriter and a Carter type ball seen the secret all along? That was certainly how it seemed.

What had come out was also amazing. I'd had ideas during my four-year sabbatical, there had been no writer's block in that regard. One had been really great, the sort of thing which certainly would have become a novel if I'd been able to write novels. Half a dozen to a dozen were of the sort I'd classify "pretty good," meaning they'd do in a pinch . . . or if they happened to unexpectedly grow tall and mysterious overnight, like Jack's beanstalk. Sometimes they do. Most were glimmers, little what-ifs that came and went like shooting stars while I was driving or walking or just lying in bed at night and waiting (or) to sleep.

The Rattford Man was a what-if. One day I saw a man in a bright red shirt washing the show windows of the JC Penney store in Derry—that's was nothing better. Penney's moved out to the mall. A young man and woman walked under his ladder—very bad luck, according to the old superstition. These two didn't know, but they were walking through

BAG OF BONES

I cried in grief for the empty years I had put behind me. I missed my friends, and without their work I craved a new life. Twenty years of less years seemed to be over. It was a relief to know that a low doesn't make a summer and eight pages of hard copy don't make a career resurrection. But I thought it better to remain in a void than out of fear as well as a loneliness so I left my job and went home or when some terrible accident has been reported. I was not because I had only realized that I had been a woman for a long time since I started walking straight down the road. I had been a miracle. I had been carried out of harm's way. I had been carried out of the carrying, but that was all right. I was a question mark. I wait for another day.

I cried it all out of me. Then I went down to the beach and sat in the cool water felt more than good. I was a question mark. I like a resurrection.

dent like this that had originally kicked the story off in my mind two or three years before.)

The yard-man, some no name in a khaki shirt sent over by a lay labor outfit, saw what was happening. He raced across the lawn, dove headfirst into the tank, and yanked the child from the bottom, leaving hair and a good chunk of scalp clogging the jet when he did. He'd give her artificial respiration until she began to breathe again. (This would be a wonderful suspenseful scene, and I couldn't wait to write it.) He would refuse all of the hysterical, relieved mother's offers of recompense, although he'd finally give her an address so that her husband could talk to him. Only both the address and his name, John Sanborn, would turn out to be a fake.

Two years later the ex-hooker with the respectable second life sees the man who saved her child on the front page of the Miami paper. His name is given as John Shackelford and he has been arrested for the rape-murder of a nine-year-old girl. And, the article goes on, he is suspected in over forty other murders, many of the victims children. Have you caught Baseball Cap? one of the reporters would yell at the press conference. "Is John Shackelford Baseball Cap?"

Well, I said, going downstairs, they sure *think* he is.

I could hear too many boats out on the lake this afternoon to make nude bathing an option. I pulled on my suit, slung a towel over my shoulders, and started down the path—the one which had been lined with glowing paper lanterns in my dream—to wash off the sweat of my nightmares and my unexpected morning's labors.

There are twenty-three railroad tie steps between Sam and the lake. I only go down only four or five before the enormity of what had just happened hit me. My mouth began to tremble. The colors of the trees and the sky mixed together as my eyes teared up. A sound began to come out of me—a kind of muffled groaning. The strength ran out of my legs and I sat down hard on a railroad tie. For a moment I thought it was over, mostly just a false alarm, and then I began to cry. I stuffed one end of the towel in my mouth during the worst of it, afraid that if the swimmers on the lake heard the sounds coming out of me, they'd think someone up here was being murdered.

CHAPTER

15

State your name for the record.

'Michael Noonan.'

'Your address?'

Derry is my permanent address — 4 Benton Street, but I also maintain a home in TR-90 on Dark Score Lake. The mailing address is Box 833. The actual house is on Lane Forty-two off Route 68.

Emmet Durgin, Kyra Devore's guardian, waved a pudgy hand in front of his face, either to shake away some troublesome insect or to tell me that was enough. I agreed that it was. I felt rather like the little girl in *Grease* who gave her address as Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, America, the Northern Hemisphere, the World, the Solar System, the Milky Way Galaxy, the Mind of God. Mostly I was nervous. I'd reached the age of forty, still a virgin in the area of court proceedings, and although we were in the conference room of Durgin, Peters and Jarrette in Bridge Street in Castle Rock, this was still a court proceeding.

There was one mentionably odd detail to these festivities. The stenographer wasn't using one of those keyboards on a post that look like adding machines, but a Stenomask, a gadget which fit over the

lower half of the stack. I'd like to know how you got your white crime novels, because where Dan Dargan is I find him always driving a red Lincoln, his wife is a pretty young blonde, green and smoking, a Carver. Glad to hear that you're a young guy who looked at the world's oldest FBI, got into it, and stayed, but hearing everything you see in it, and that's not the only thing, monotone was even weirder.

Thank you, Mr. Noonan. Mewich is a real old fart, but you're her favorite, after I, so what? I'm not a real old fart. Dargan hacked early. Wasn't he? He was a Texas Marine, they like—they have expansive narratives with a lot of violence, but there is a subgroup which I think it is the FBI. I mean, it's less. You don't want to fuck with the FBI, is it? You can't get it. It will burn your nose and rape your gilly. It's the bad boys, and it's not an opportunity. Few of them sit in. Over five foot two. Dargan's a real I, estimated, and many are under five feet. True symbol. I'd like their eyes don't smut. The Evil Little Fat Folk, the whole world's. Most of them hate books who can look down the length of their noses at their own feet. This included me, although just barely.

Please thank your wife for me. Mr. Dargan, I wish she could recommend one for you to start on."

Dargan chuckled. On his right, Dargan's assistant, a pretty young woman who looked approximately seventeen minutes old, also chuckled. On my left, Ramon Bessette, a black Texan, the world's oldest FBI, plainly wore a marker in his Stetson.

I'll wait for the big screen version, I said. His eyes glimmered with gleam, as if he knew a theater, and he never, as I said, that my books—only a modest TV movie, *Book of the Dead*, but it's roughly equal to the National Set. Refreshing. You may say, but we've completed this chapter, the book's done, it's over.

"I am byra Dever's guardian, and I'm a real old fart. Do you know what that means, Mr. Noonan?"

"I believe I do."

"It means," Dargan told me, "that I've got a postcard from Ramon Bessette to let you know that Dever's not a real old fart."

should a custody judgment become necessary. Judge Rancourt would not, in such an event, be required to base his decision on my conclusions, but in many cases that is what happens."

He looked at me with his hands folded on a blank legal pad. The pretty assistant, on the other hand, was scribbling madly. Perhaps she didn't trust the fighter pilot. Durgin looked as if he expected a round of applause.

"Was that a question, Mr. Durgin?" I asked and Romeo Bissonette levered a light, practiced snap to my ankle. I didn't need to look at him to know it wasn't an accident.

Durgin pursed lips so smooth and damp that he looked as if he were wearing a clear glass on them. On his shining pate, roughly two dozen strands of hair were combed in smooth little arcs. He gave me a patient, measuring look. Behind it was all the intransigent ugliness of an Evil Little Fat Folk. The pleasantries were over, all right. I was sure of it.

No, Mr. Noonan, that was not a question. I simply thought you might like to know why we've had to ask you to come away from your lovely lake on such a pleasant morning. Perhaps I was wrong. Now it—

There was a peremptory knock on the door, followed by your friend and his, George Fortman. Billy Cleveland Casablanc had been replaced by a sleek Deputy Sheriff's uniform, complete with Sam Browne belt and sidearm. He helped himself to a good look at the assistant's bustline, displayed in a blue silk blouse, then handed her a folder and a cassette tape recorder. He gave me one brief glance before leaving. *I know it's a mistake*, that glance said. *You're already better for a tape with*.

Romeo Bissonette tapped his head toward me. He used the side of his hand to bridge the gap between his mouth and my ear. Devore's tape, he said.

I nodded to show I understood, then turned to Durgin again.

"Mr. Noonan, you've met Kyla Devore and her mother, Mary Devore, haven't you?"

How did you get Mattie out of Mary, I wondered . . . and then knew, just as I had known about the white shorts and halter top. *Mattie* was how Ki had first tried to say *Mary*.

"Mr. Noonan, are we keeping you up?"

"There's no need to be sarcastic, is there?" Bissonette asked. His tone

was ruled, but Elmer Durgin gave him a look which said, "I should like to see the LLF's stuck in a cage, and I wouldn't mind if they would be aboard the first galag bound boxcar."

"I'm sorry," I said before Durgin could reply. "I just got derailed there for a second or two."

"New story, then," Durgin liked I smiled I said. "I've been like a swamp toed in a sport. But I'm done. I'll be out to strike that list, then repeat this question at next meeting. Mr. Noonan."

"Yes, I said, I had met them."

"Once or more than once?"

"More than once."

"How many times have you met them?"

"Twice."

"Have you also spoken to Mary Devore on the phone?"

Already these questions were making me feel that I had been uncomfortable.

"Yes."

"How many times?"

Three times. The third had come the day after I was asked if I would join her and Joan Scarrow for a picnic in the next town common after my deposition. I was right there in the middle of town before God and everybody, and although with a New York lawyer to play chaperone, what harm in that?

"Have you spoken to Kyra Devore on the telephone?"

What an odd question! Not only nobody had presented me with her, I supposed that was at least partly why I had asked it.

"Mr. Noonan."

"Yes, I've spoken to her once."

"Can you tell us the nature of that conversation?"

"Well, I looked and truly at Bessie Miller. But there was no one there. He obviously didn't know, either. "Mattie—"

"Pot on me," Durgin kept I told I was never asked if I was were intent in their pink pockets of flesh. "Mattie?"

"Mattie Devore. Mary Devore."

"You call her Mattie?"

"Yes," I said, and had a wild impulse to add *In bed. In bed I call her Mattie. Don't stop. Don't stop. I cry.* It's the name she gave me when she introduced herself. I met her—

"We may get to that, but right now I'm interested in your telephone conversation with Kyra Devore. When was that?"

"It was yesterday."

"July ninth, 1998."

"Yes."

"Who placed that call?"

"Ma. Mary Devore. Not a hell of a very good call, I thought, and I'll admit that I can't get inside my own head. I prefer to consist of feeding a few more little-stuffed straws into a bowl of potatoes of weird and formed dwarves."

"How did Kyra Devore happen to speak to you?"

"She asked if she could. I heard her saying to her mother that she had to tell me something."

"What was it she had to tell you?"

"That she had her first bubble bath."

"Did she also say she coughed?"

I was quiet, looking at him. In that moment I understood why people hate lawyers, especially when they've been dished over by one who's good at the job.

"Mr. Noonan, would you like me to repeat the question?"

"No," I said, wondering where he'd gotten his information. Had these bastards tapped Martie's phone? My phone? Born? Perhaps for the first time I understood on a gut level what it must be like to have half a billion dollars. With that much dough you could tap a lot of telephones. She said her mother pushed bubbles in her face and she coughed. But she was—

"Thank you, Mr. Noonan, now let's turn to—"

Let him finish, Bissonette said. I had an idea he had already taken a bigger part in the proceedings than he had expected to, but he didn't seem to mind. He was a sleepy-looking man with a bloodhound's mournful, trustworthy face. "This isn't a courtroom, and you're not cross-examining him."

"I have the little girl's welfare to think of," Durgin said. He sounded

"Suppose you had been coming the other way, though—heading north instead of south. Would you still have seen her in plenty of time?"

That was a fairer question than some of his others, actually. Someone coming the other way would have had a far shorter time to react. Still,

"Yes," I said.

Dargin went up with the eyebrows. "You're sure of that?"

"Yes, Mr. Dargin. I might have had to come down a little harder on the brakes, but—"

"At thirty-five."

"Yes, at thirty-five. I told you, that's the speed limit—"

—on that particular stretch of Route 68. Yes, you told me that. You did. Is it your experience that most people obey the speed limit on that part of the road?"

I haven't spent much time on the TR since 1993, so I can't—

Come on, Mr. Noonan—this isn't a scene from one of your books. Just answer my questions, or we'll be here all morning."

"I'm doing my best, Mr. Dargin."

He sighed, put upon. "You've owned your place on Dark Score Lake since the eighties, haven't you? And the speed limit around the Lakeview General Store, the post office, and Dick Brucass's All Purpose Garage—what's called The North Village—hasn't changed since then, has it?"

"No," I admitted.

Returning to my original question, then—in your observation, do most people on that stretch of road obey the thirty-five mile an hour limit?"

"I can't say if it's true, because I've never done a traffic survey, but I guess a lot don't."

Would you like to hear Castle County Sheriff's Deputy Foreman testify on where the greatest number of speeding tickets are given out on TR-90, Mr. Noonan?"

"No," I said, quite honestly.

Did other vehicles pass you while you were speaking first with Kyra Devore and then with Mary Devore?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

BAG OF BONDS

"I don't know exactly. A couple."

"Could it have been three?"

'I guess.'

'Five'

"No, probably not so many."

'But you don't know, exactly, do you?'

 N_2

"Because Kyra Devore was upset."

"Actually she had it together pretty well for a

"Did she cry in your presence?"

"Well . . . yes "

"Did her mother make her cry?"

"That's unfair."

As unfair as I was, a nice word does strengthen the bond of a busy highway with busy touring motorists. It's not quite as unfair as that!

Jeepers, says Mr. Bissonette, and all that was missing was the bloodhound's face.

'I withdraw the question,' Durrin said.

"Which one?" I asked.

He looked at me treacherously as I say in my dream, sitting up with my eyes wide open all the time and he was used to a boy who was always asleep. I saw that he was going away from the tunnel and back. I felt a little up at the time, but I was not ready to let the time when you would find the dog's path.

I dated him, carried him, saved his life, and he didn't even
answer the old guy's letter. I'm getting the best of this, I mean.
And now in a few weeks I'll be free. I'll have no more to do for

'I told you, I don't know for sure'

"Well, give me a guesstimate "

word. There might have been three

"Including Mary Devore herself? Driving a " He consulted the paper he'd taken from the folder "—a 1982 Jeep Scout."

thought that Keynes was "the only one who had been reading Marx" (Dennis was reading too). And he knew no more of the "other side" of the coin.

Yes, it was her and it was a Scout. I don't know what year

Was she driving below the posted speed limit, at the posted speed limit, or above the posted speed limit when she passed the place where you were standing with Kyra in your arms?"

She'd been doing at least fifty, but I told Durgin I couldn't say for sure. He urged me to try. *I know you are unfamiliar with the neighborhood. Mr. Noonan, after my recollection, if you can look at it*—and I declined as politely as I could.

He picked up the paper again. Mr. Noonan, would it surprise you to know that two witnesses—Richard Brooks, Junior, the owner of Dick's All-Purpose Garage, and Royce Merrill, a retired carpenter—claim that Mrs. Devore was doing well over thirty-five when she passed your location?

I don't know, I said. I was concerned with the little girl.

Would it surprise you to know that Royce Merrill estimated her speed at *sixty* miles an hour?"

That's ridiculous. When she hit the brakes she would have skidded sideways and landed upside down in the ditch."

The skid marks measured by Deputy Foreman indicated a speed of at least fifty miles an hour. Durgin said. It wasn't a question, but he looked at me a most disgustingly as if daring me to struggle a little more and sink a little deeper into his nasty pit. I said nothing. Durgin folded his pudgy little hands and leaned over them toward me. The roguish look was gone.

Mr. Noonan, if you hadn't carried Kyra Devore to the side of the road—if you hadn't rescued her—mightn't it be that *she* have run her over?"

Here was the really loaded question, and how should I answer it? Bissonette was certainly not flashing any helpful signals, he seemed to be trying to make meaningful eye contact with the pretty assistant. I thought of the book Matte was reading in tandem with "Bartleby." *My Little Boy*, by Richard North Patterson. Unlike the Grisham brand, Patterson's lawyers almost always seemed to know what they were doing. *Open a Yellow Holes*, all depended on the part of the witness.

I shrugged. "Sorry, counselor, can't say—left my crystal ball home."

Again I saw the ugly flash in Durgin's eyes. Mr. Noonan, I can

PAGE OF BYNES

write your next steps to answer it later on."

'I suggested I've directed that the school should be
entirely a law first, then a law school, and then a law school. Mr.
Merrill's vision is, or if Deputy Footman even measured the right set of skid-
marks. I think a whole lot of people are going to
tell you. Suppose you go together. I think it's a
twenty-one year old. I don't know if it's a
young skid mark at the park. Suppose I see a
the child, and easily.'

"I think that's cute enough."

Why? Because you're not getting what you want. You've since clipped my ank (and a butt) and left it. But you're not. So why do you, someone who's not a person, do that to me?

A detailed little story to read. Dings says, "I can't tell you where you can find him. He pulled the cover over his face and hid from him. Since you have mentioned his name, I will tell you Mr. Maxwell Devereux of Palm Springs, California, is the man I am looking for."

"It's your show."

"Have you ever spoken with Maxwell Devore?"

Yes

*In person or on the phone? *

Phone. I thought about it, didn't call, and I never mentioned it to any of my unbiased number three members. But Matt, who's a number one, decided to keep my mouth shut on that subject.

'When was this'

Last Saturday night, The night we celebrated the new year, watching the fireworks."

"And was the subject of your own sexual abuse as a child?"
 "Yes. As he asked Darlene not to go to the police, I did not
 settle rape. There was no investigation, just a 'do as you would
 be done by' moment. He looked like a paralytic, almost as if he was
 dead. I had a handkerchief. And he was lying. I was sure that he was
 David. I typed out my story to the police, and he was not
 there."

last been too loud, and in some level I'd been aware of that fact even while I was talking to him—and I thought it really was on the cassette Durgin was now slotting into the cassette player—but it was a bluff.

"I don't recall," I said.

Durgin's hand froze in the act of snapping the cassette's transparent loading panel shut. He looked at me with frank disbelief—and something else. I thought the something else was surprised anger.

"You can't recall? Come now, Mr. Neenan. Surely writers *do* remember themselves to recall conversations, and this one was only a week ago. Tell me what you talked about."

"I really can't say." I told him in a steady, colorless voice.

For a moment Durgin looked almost panicky. Then his features smoothed. One polished fingernail slipped back and forth over keys marked *key*, *play*, and *stop*. "How did Mr. Devere begin the conversation?" he asked.

He said *hello*," I said mindily, and there was a short muffled sound from behind the Stearnsask. It could have been the old guy clearing his throat, it could have been a suppressed laugh.

Spots of color were blooming in Durgin's cheeks. "After *hello*? What then?"

"I don't recall."

"Did he ask you about that morning?"

"I don't recall."

Didn't you tell him that Mary Devere and her daughter were together, Mr. Neenan? That they were together picking flowers? Isn't that what you told this worried grandfather when he inquired about the accident which was the talk of the township that Fourth of July?"

"Oh now, Bissonette," said He, "take one hand over the table, then touch the palm with the fingers of the other, making a ref's T. Time out."

Durgin looked at him. The flesh in his cheeks was more pronounced now, and his lips had pulled back enough to show the tips of small, neatly capped teeth. "What do you want?" he almost snarled, as if Bissonette had just dropped by to tell him about the Mormon Way or perhaps the Rosicrucians.

BAG OF BONES

$$\begin{aligned} \text{[wait } x \text{] to stop [wait } x \text{] to stop } x &= (x \mid x) \text{ to stop } x \\ \text{[wait } x \text{] to stop [wait } x \text{] to stop } x &= (x \mid x) \text{ to stop } x \end{aligned}$$

W W Durgin snapped

ence call to Judge Rancourt, get his opinion.

Twelve weeks ago, says Deere's Kretschmer, a farmer in the stateless sugarcane Mr. N. says, "I was with a lot of

'I want to help Kyrä Devore if I can,' I said.

Very well. He understands it. So, sorry to hear that, please tell me what you and Miss Hilders have talked about.

"you can refresh my recollection."

There was a moment of silence, like that which occurs in a high stakes poker game just after the last cards are dealt, and just before the players show their hands. I sat at the table and was quiet, my eyes drinking in the dark. The DJ began playing cassette music as it with the heel of his hand, this is not how he felt about it just then as I sat in felt, so that the room took me back to the morning of July fourth. He never spoke again after with Mattie and Kevin Tuesday night, in never returned to the phone conversation with Devere. The next morning, I did some awkward and easily disprovable things.

I went on answering questions and he went right on asking them. I was really excited when Dargun pushed back the flap of my coat with the heel of his hand. I knew it, and I'm pretty sure he did, too.

"Mike! Mike, over here!"

Mattie was waving from one of the first seats in the crowded theatre. I saw a town common school student shake his head at me and make my way in that direction. I was sitting next to a young man who was a little older than I, and I noticed which way he was looking. I was sitting next to a young man who was a little older than I, and I noticed which way he was looking.

There was a full sky over all new water collected, and no clouds in March, not new water was stored in the reservoir.

arms around me, hugged me—it was no prudish little ass poking-out tug, either—and then kissed me on the mouth hard enough to push my lips against my teeth. There was a hearty smack when she disengaged. She pulled back and looked at me with undisguised delight. “Was it the biggest kiss you’ve ever had?”

The biggest in at least four years, I said. Will you settle for that? And if she didn’t step away from me in the next few seconds, she was going to have physical proof of how much I had enjoyed it.

I guess I’ll have to. She turned to the redheaded guy with a funny kind of defiance. “Was that all right?”

Probably not, he said, but at least you’re not currently in view of those old boys at the All Purpose Garage. Mike, Jim, John Storrow. Nice to meet you in person.”

I like him at once, maybe because I’d come up on him dressed in his three-piece New York suit and primly setting out paper plates on a picnic table while his curly red hair blew around his head like kelp. His skin was fair and freckled, the kind which would never tan, only burn and then peel in great oozemalike patches. When we shook, his hand seemed to be all knuckles. He had to be at least thirty, but he looked Mattie’s age—and I guessed it would be another five years before he was able to get a drink without showing his driver’s license.

Sit down, he said. We’ve got a nice coarse lunch—courtesy of Castle Rock Variety—grinders, which are for some strange reason called Italian sandwiches up here—mozzarella sticks—garlic fries—Twinkies.”

“That’s only four,” I said.

I forget the soft or the coarse, he said, and pulled three long-neck bottles of S.O.B. brew beer out of a brown bag. Let’s eat. Mattie runs the library from two to eight on Fridays and Saturdays, and this would be a bad time for her to be missing work.”

How did the readers come to go last night? I asked. Linley Briggs didn’t eat you alive, I see.”

She laughed, clasped her hands and shook them over her head. “I was a nut! An absolute smashnola. I didn’t dare tell them I got all my best insights from you—”

RAG OF BONUS

The book contains 11 chapters. Six of them are devoted to the study of the asymptotic behaviour of the solutions of the Cauchy problem for the wave equation in the case of a general domain. The remaining five chapters are devoted to the study of the asymptotic behaviour of the solutions of the Cauchy problem for the wave equation in the case of a general domain.

It was sort of wonderful. I felt like a college kid."

"Good."

Basso told John Stewart Jones, "What's the last thing you named Romeo before?"

'Said he had to go right back to Lewiston. Sorry.'

his sandwich—they come tucked into long sub rolls—and looked at me, surprised. "This isn't bad."

Eat more than once and you are more likely to meet with success. She chomped heartily into her own.

Tell us about the deposit. I finished, and while they ate, I talked. When I finished, I picked up my own sandwich and gave it a little catch-up. I'd forgotten how good an Italian sandwich is, sweet, sour, and oily all at the same time. Of course nothing that tastes that good can be healthy, that's a given. I suppose one could contribute as much as possible about full-body bags from young girls' illegal tanning.

Very interesting. John said: "Very interesting, like the Italian mozzarella stick from its grease, stirred on a brick top and then cooked with a kind of tomato sauce here at the cottage with garlic sauce. People up here eat this?" he asked.

'People in New York eat fish bladders,' I said. "Raw."

Tache. He dipped a piece into the 15 sec. container of space jelly. Since in this context it is a *deictic* use, only in western Main can you do it.

"Well?" I asked

"Not bad. They ought to be a lot noisier, though."

Yes, he was right about that eating. I'd never had sticks, so it was like eating—oh, so not an observation I thought I would keep to myself on this beautiful midsummer Friday.

If Dargin is doing the tape, why wouldn't he tell Matt? Matt asks, "I don't understand."

Jill stretched his arms out, cracked his knuckles, and looked at her benignly. "Well, probably never know for sure," he said.

He thought Devore was going to drop the suit—it was in every line of his body language and every inflection of his voice. That was hopeful, but it would be good if Mattie didn't allow herself to become *too* hopeful. Jean Scarrow wasn't as young as he looked, and probably not as glibless, either (or so I fervently hoped), but he *was* young. And neither he nor Mattie knew the story of Scooter Larabee's sled. Or had seen Bill Dean's face when he told it.

"Want to hear some possibilities?"

"Sure," I said.

Jean put down his sandwich, wiped his fingers, and then began to tick off points. First, *he* made the call. Taped conversations have a highly dubious value under those circumstances. Second, he didn't exactly come off like Captain Kangaroo, did he?

"No."

Third, your fabrication impugns *not* Mike, but not really very much, and it doesn't impugn Mattie at all. And by the way, that thing about Mattie pushing bubbles in Kyra's face. I love that. If that's the best they can do, they better give it up right now. Last—and this is where the truth probably lies—I think Devore's got Nixon's Disease.

"Nixon's Disease?" Mattie asked.

The tape Dargin had snatched the only tape. Can't be. And your father-in-law is afraid that it re-introduces one tape made by whatever system it's got in Warrington's—well, it subpoenaed it of them. And I damn well try.

She looked bewildered. "What could be on them? And if it's bad, why not just destroy them?"

"Maybe he can't," I said. "Maybe he needs them for other reasons."

It didn't really matter. Jenn said, "Dargin was bluffing, and *that's* what matters." He put the heel of his hand lightly against the picnic table. "I think he's going to drop it. I really do."

It's too early to start making like that, I said, at once—but I could tell by Mattie's face—shining more brightly than ever—that the damage was done.

"Till him no more else," she began. "Mattie, I know I've got to get to the library."

"Where do you send Kitty now, dear?"

"Mrs. Cummings' Sunday school up to the West. Last July there's VBS from ten until three. I sing Vespers at St. Luke's, especially the singing, and I act in a play. I'm the boy, Noah and Moses. The boys drop her off at Ark City. It's a quarter of nine. She's used to the west, so I'll be asleep as sleep on the couch."

John had left for the next to the next sets of railroad cars, east long but had already started a letter to his family. A man in California was gathering facts about Roger Devor, and Marie's letter to gathering facts sounded so much better than his own. He was particularly interested in learning all about the parent of Roger Devor's relations with his father, and if Roger was ever married, as a niece from Maine. John had also composed out a letter to his father as much as possible about Max Devor's intentions to return since he'd come back to IR 20. To east end he had the name of a private investigator, one recommended by Romeo Bosen for the time being.

As he spoke, paging rapidly through a letter notebook, he took from the inside pocket of his suit coat a remembrance of what he thought of as Lady Justice carrying out telephone conversations. A small, thin, black, rectangular object, like a tape recorder, he took out and held it in his hand. "It was a box, like a tape recorder, but we were doing, but I thought the very best we were doing was to get it in a little. I imagined poor Roger Devor, a man who had been down three thousand miles in order to be in the state of his preferences. I had to keep reminding myself that just over his part in in that position, not Mattie or me or John Storrow."

"Have you gotten any closer to a meeting with Devor, or his legal advisor?" I asked.

"Don't know for sure. The phone is very well known, so I can take the picks in the telephone book, but I can't get any more of them if you desire."

"Got your irons in the fire," Mattie said.

"Your checkers on the board," I added.

We looked at each other and laughed. John regarded us sadly, then sighed, picked up his sandwich, and began to eat again.

"You really have to meet him with his lawyer more or less dancing attendance?" I asked.

"Would you like to win this thing, then discover Devore can do it all again based on unethical behavior by Mary Devore's legal resources?" John returned.

"Don't even joke about it!" Mattie cried.

"I wasn't joking," John said. "It has to be with his lawyer, yes. I don't think it's going to happen, not on this trip. I haven't even got a look at the old *skunk*, and I have to tell you my curiosity is killing me."

"If that's all it takes to make you happy, show up behind the backstop at the softball field next Tuesday evening," Mattie said. "He'll be there in his fancy wheelchair, laughing and clapping and sucking his damned old oxygen every fifteen minutes or so."

"Not a bad idea," John said. "I have to go back to New York for the weekend. I'm leaving *after* Osgood—but maybe I'll show up on Tuesday. I might even bring my glove." He began clearing up our litter, and once again I thought he looked both prissy and endearing at the same time, like Stan Laurel wearing an apron. Mattie eased him aside and took over.

"No one ate any Twinkies," she said, a little sadly.

"Take them home to your daughter," John said.

"No way. I don't let her eat stuff like this. What kind of mother do you think I am?"

She saw our expressions, replayed what she'd just said, then burst out laughing. We joined her.

Mattie's old Scout was parked in one of the slant spaces behind the war memorial when in Castle Rock is a World War I soldier with a generous helping of birdshit on his pie-dish helmet. A brand new Taurus with a Hertz decal above the inspection sticker was parked next to it. John tossed his briefcase—reassuringly thin and not very ostentatious—into the back seat.

BAG OF BONDS

"If I can make it easier for you, I will," said Osgood. "I will also call you."

"I'll buy the Italian sandwiches," Mattie said.

He smiled then, a smile that reached into his eyes, and said, "Yes, I did. He looked so happy, and he was. I was so glad to see him. It was the first couple."

You two talk on the telephone, and I can remember exactly how often you may say yes. Mike says to you, "If you happen to Mike, you might be at the door of the house and check out a book."

Not only your new sweater, but the *demure glance*

*But no more visits to Matt's street. It is that over is all.

I said yes she said yes John Starn was asked the same I was wondering if he was seeing something that we shouldn't be there

They are committed to a resolution of the controversy, he said. "We can't risk giving them a second chance. That means innuendoes about the two characters, the characters about Mike and Kyra."

Matt's shocked expression made her ask twice. "M... Matt? Kyra! What are you talking about?"

Allegations of "hole in station" and "a whole lot" of "spies" they'll try anything."

That's ridiculous, says 1. And it's a terrible new car that's not that kind of mud."

John nodded. Yes, we do need help to bring attention to news paper coverage from coast to coast would be a wonderful thing. I'll God bless and save us. We want to find out what is going on out there good for the gr. waits and lets go to get it right. News

He bent and kissed Mattie's cheek.

'Custody's just this way

I think you were in my class just after the first day's work.

make a thing like that up just because there was no other way for them to win . . .

Let me warn you again, he said. His face came as close to grim as its veiled and good-natured features would probably allow. "What we have is a very rich man with a very shaky case. The combination could be like working with old dynamite."

I turned to Mattie. "Are you still worried about Ki? Still feel she's in danger?"

I saw her think about hedging her response—but it plain old Yankee reserve—quite likely—and then deciding not to. Deciding, perhaps, that hedging was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"Yes. But it's just a feeling, you know."

John was frowning. I supposed the idea that Devere might resort to extralegal means of obtaining what he wanted had occurred to him—as well. "Keep your eye on her as much as you can," he said. "I respect intuition. Is yours based on anything concrete?"

No," Mattie answered, and her quick glance in my direction asked me to keep my mouth shut. Not really. She opened the Scout's door and tossed in the little brown bag with the Twinkies in it—she had decided to keep them after all. Then she turned to John and me with an expression that was close to anger. "I'm not sure how to follow that advice anyway. I work five days a week, and in August, when we do the month-long update, it'll be six. Right now Ki gets her lunch at Vacation Bible School and her dinner from Arlene Culam. I see her in the mornings. The rest of the time . . . I knew what she was going to say before she said it; the expression was an old one . . . so even the FR

I could help you find an *in loco*," I said, thinking it would be a hell of a lot cheaper than John Storrow.

No—they said in such perfect unison that they glanced at each other and laughed. But even while she was laughing, Mattie looked tense and unhappy.

We're not going to leave a paper trail for Durgin or Devere's custody team to exploit," John said. "Who pays me's one thing. Who pays Mattie's child-care help is another."

Besides, I've taken enough from you," Mattie said. "More than I can

3AG OF BONES

sleep easy, no harm to our guests, and the guests are happy.

having no guests, no drinks, but the guests are happy.

I tested my muscles for energy. 'No,' said my doctor, 'your energy level, and the contract, was so serious that you had to stop. You don't have anything else to spend it on. Really.'

When he asked for help, I said, "I'll be there by 11." About 10:50, I saw a white van with a red cross on its side about K. I stepped out and asked, "Is this the van? Is this about me. All right?"

Yeah. But you need to let your husband know that you're doing this. He's got to know that you've got a husband's support. It's not really bitter when you know he's not there, any else. When you tell someone they know, without your say so.

She smiled. It's already been done. On June 5, 1987, I met Mike. She lifted my hand, gave it a barely perceptible squeeze.

What do you think? I ask. If it is as we think it is, getting on its way to the new Proletariat Bride, it's spilling out onto Highway 68.

I think it's grand she has a well-behaved son, and a smart lawyer. John said he passed them well. But I told you a strange thing—she somehow doesn't check her notes. I never see her get... I don't know.

"That there's a cloud around her you can't quite see."

"Maybe. Maybe that's it " He raked his hands through the restless mass of his red hair "I just know it's something sad "

I knew exactly what he meant – except that there was more. I wanted to be in bed with her, so I put my right hand on her waist, and I put her hands on my thighs, and I pressed my face against her neck. I wanted to be able to smell her skin, to taste her hair, to feel her breasts against my ear, her breasts touching my face. So I said, "I want to do what you want to do." She said, "I want to do what I want to do." So I told her to do what I wanted, whatever I wanted.

I get back to Sara. Large is actually a lot more than a letter. She's thinking about nothing but my story and the SM was a great letter. I was writing again to her. I could see her. I was not that it felt much like we were together.

maybe six o'clock, swim, then go down to the Village Cafe for one of Buddy's cholesterol-rich specialties.

The moment I stepped through the door, Bunter's bell began to ring stridently. I stepped in, the foyer, my hand frozen on the knob. The house was hot and bright, not a shadow anywhere, but the gooseflesh forming on my arms felt like midnight.

"Who's here?" I called.

The bell stopped ringing. There was a moment of silence, and then a woman shrieked. It came from everywhere, pouring out of the sunny, mote-laden air like sweat out of hot skin. It was a scream of outrage, anger, grief—but mostly, I think, of horror. And I screamed in response. I could not help it. I had been frightened standing in the dark cellar stairwell, listening to the unseen fist thump in the insulation, but this was far worse.

It never stopped that scream. It faded, as the child's sobs had faded, faded as if the person screaming was being carried rapidly down a long corridor and away from me.

At last it was gone.

I leaned against the bookcase, my palm pressed against my tee-shirt, my heart galloping beneath it. I was gasping for breath, and my muscles had that queer *explosive* feel they get after you've had a bad scare.

A minute passed. My heartbeat gradually slowed, and my breathing slowed with it. I straightened up, took a tottery step, and when my legs held me, took two more. I stood in the kitchen doorway, looking across the living room. Above the fireplace, Bunter the moose looked glassy, as if at me. The bell around his neck hung still and chimeless. A hot sunpoint glowed on its side. The only sound was that stupid Felix the Cat clock in the kitchen.

The thought nagging at me, even then, was that the screaming woman had been Jo—that Sara Loughs was being nagged by my wife, and that she was in pain. Deed or not, she was in pain.

"Jo?" I asked quietly. "Jo, are you—"

The sobbing began again—the sound of a terrified child. At the same moment my mouth and nose once more filled with the iron taste of the lake. I put one hand to my throat, gagging and frightened, then leaned

CHAPTER

16

The book was big, okay? The book was major.

I was afraid to change *my* ~~my~~ let alone pack up the typewriter and my sam just begun manuscript and take it back to Derry. That would be as dangerous as taking an infant out in a windstorm. So I stayed, always reserving the right to move out if things got too weird, the way smokers reserve the right to quit if their coughs get too heavy, and a week passed. Things happened during that week, but until I met Max Devore on The Street the following Friday—the seventeenth of July, it would have been—the most important thing was that I continued to work on a novel which would, if finished, be called *Mr. G. and the P. and*. Perhaps we always think what was lost was the best—or would have been the best. I don't know for sure. What I do know was that my real life that week had money to do with Andy Drake, John Strickland, and a shadowy figure standing in the deep background: Raymond Garraty, John Shackelford, my kind of friend. A man who sometimes wore a baseball cap.

During that week, the manifestations in the house continued, out at a lower level—there was nothing like that blood-arthing scream. Sometimes bonfires belching, and sometimes the fruit and vegetable mag-

watching the game and chatting like old friends for two innings before they saw me—more than enough time for me to feel envious of John's position, and a little jealous as well.

Finally someone lofted a long fly to center, where the edge of the woods served as the only fence. The center fielder backed up, but it was going to be far over his head. It was hit to my depth, off to my right. I moved in that direction without thinking, high-topping through the shrubs that formed a zone between the mown outfield and the trees, hoping I wasn't running through poison ivy. I caught the softball in my outstretched left hand, and laughed when some of the spectators entered. The center fielder applauded me by tapping his bare right hand into the pocket of his glove. The batter, meanwhile, circled the bases strenuously, knowing he had hit a ground rule home run.

I tossed the ball to the pitcher and as I returned to my original post among the candy wrappers and beer cans, I looked back in and saw Mattie and John looking at me.

If anything confirms the idea that we're just another species of animal, one with a slightly bigger brain and a *whole* bigger idea of our own importance in the scheme of things, it's how much we can convey by gesture when we absolutely have to. Mattie clasped her hands to her chest, tilted her head to the left, raised her eyebrows. My dad held my hands to my shoulders and flipped the palms skyward. *Shuck, what a fuckin' flake!* John lowered his head and put his fingers to his brow as if something there hurt. *You lucky son of a bitch!*

With those comments out of the way, I pointed at the duckstop and struggled a question. Both Mattie and John shrugged back. An inning later a little boy who looked like one giant expanding freckle ran out to where I was, his oversized Michael Jordan jersey turning around his shins like a dress.

Get down there, gimme fifty cent to say you should call him later on at his hotel over in the Ruck, he said, pointing at John. He say you gimme another fifty cent if there was an answer."

Tell him I'll call him around nine thirty, I said. "I don't have any change, though. Can you take a buck?"

Hey, yeah, swank. He snatched it, turned away, then turned back

He grinned revealing a set of teeth that felt like a row of nails. A row of
With the streetball players in the neighborhood, I look like a
Rockwell archetype. Guy knows he's got a serious look.

It's them people use to say it's sad to see a kid with a
time."

"Willie who?"

Ah, youth. Ah, mores. "Just tell him, son. He'll know."

I stayed another minute, but when the rain came down
Devore said I hadn't shown, and I went back to the room. I
met one fisherman standing out on the stairs, two others
strutting along The Street toward Warrington's, the three of them
They said hi and I hid my face back. It felt lonely and
time. I believe that is a rare kind of happiness.

Some people check their phone answers, but they were not
home that summer. I always looked the front of the house. I
meanie-chin, beanie, as Bulwinkle Moose used to say. I spent
about to speak. That night the light bulb over the front
cradle magnets had reformed into a single shape, a shape that
haps the letter S taking a nap.



A little later I called John and asked him what Devore's name was
he repeated in words what he'd already told me several times
nominally by gesture. It's the first game he's ever played. I
back, he said. "Matt, the I ask a few people, it was a
consensus seemed to be that he was at least as far as I know."

"What do you mean she *tried* asking a few people?"

I mean that several would not even talk to me. One of the
parents' generation would have said, "I don't know." I
didn't say, "I don't know." I said, "I don't know." One of the
friends spoke to her finally, but she's a good girl and she's not
Devore. That man Osgood may be a shiny side of the coin. Devore's
Mr. Moneybags has long, wonderful, long, long, long, long, long
other looks, the town of the town. Miss. I don't know, but I don't

It's just the TR, I said absently. "There's no real way to explain it. Do you actually believe Devere's driving *everyone*? That doesn't say much for the old Wertsworthian idea of pastoral innocence and goodness, does it?"

"He's spreading money and using Osgood—maybe Feltman, too—to spread stories. And the folks around here seem at least as honest as honest politicians."

"The ones who stay bought?"

Yeah. Oh, and I saw one of Devere's potential star witnesses in the Case of the Runaway Child, Royce Merrill. He was over by the equipment shed with some of his cronies. Did you happen to notice him?"

I said I had not.

Gay must be a hundred and thirty, John said. "He's got a cane with a gold head the size of an elephant's asshole."

"That's a *Baton Perle* cane. The oldest person in the area gets to keep it."

And I have no doubt he came by it honestly. If Devere's lawyers put him on the stand, I'll debone him. There was something chilling in John's gleeful confidence.

I'm sure, I said. How'd Mattie take getting cut dead by her old friends? I was thinking of her saying that she dated Tuesday nights, dated to think of the softball games going on as they always had at the field where she had met her late husband.

She did okay, John said. I think she's given most of them up as a lost cause anyway. I had my doubts about that. —I seem to remember that at twenty-one lost causes are sort of a specialty—but I didn't say anything. She's hanging in. She's been lonely and scared, I think that in her own mind she might already have begun the process of giving Kyr up, but she's got her confidence back now. Mostly thanks to meet-ing you. Talk about your fantastic early lucky breaks.

Well, maybe. I flashed on Joe's brother Frank once saying to me that he didn't think there was any such thing as luck—only fate and inspired choices. And, then I remembered that image of the TR crisscrossed with invisible cables, connections that were unseen but as strong as steel.

John, I forgot to ask the most important question of all the other day, after I gave my depo. This last day case we're all so interested in... has it even been scheduled?"

by all the men who went away to the Civil War and died there—over six hundred went from this part of the world, Mr. Noonan, and less than a hundred and fifty came back—at least in their bodies. Ma said this side of Dark Seaside's also haunted by the ghost of that Negro boy who died here, poor tyke. He belonged to one of the Red Taps, you know."

Not I know about Sara and the Red Taps, but not this. I paused. "Did he drown?"

Nawp, caught in an animal trap. Struggled there for most of a waele day, screaming for help. Finally they found him. They saved the foot, but they should'n have. Blood poisoning set in and the boy died. Summer of aught-one, that was. It's why they left, I guess—it was too sad to stay. But my ma used to claim the little fella, *he stayed*. She used to say that he's still on the TR."

I wondered what Mrs. M. would say if I told her that the little fella had very likely been here to greet me when I arrived from Derry, and had been back on several occasions since.

Then there was Kenny Auster's father, Normal,' she said. You know that story don't you? Oh, that's a terrible story. Sae looked rather pleased—either at knowing such a terrible story or at having the chance to tell it.

Not I said. "I know Kenny, though. He's the one with the wolfhound, Blueberry."

Ayah. He carpenters a tad and caretakes a tad, just like his father before him. His dad worked many of these places, you know, and back just after the Second World War was over, Normal Auster drowned Kenny's little brother in his back yard. This was when they lived on Wasp Hill down where the road splits, one side going to the old boat landing and the other to the marina. He didn't drown the tyke in the lake, though. He put him on the ground under the pump and just held him there until the baby was full of water and dead.

I stood there looking at her, the curtains behind us snapping on their wirlgig. I thought of my mouth and nose and throat full of that cold mineral taste that could have been well water as well as lakewater down here, all of it comes from the same deep aquifers. I thought of the message on the refrigerator: *help im drown*.

"He ate the dog, I think," she said, "and put the bones in the Chevrolet and he drove it down to the beach. I think he had a gun, too."

"You are going to the Kew-Yawster at some time, aren't you, my house, are you, Mrs. Meserve?"

"She took her head. Nawp, nawp. I'm the Brickers. I'm the Brickers. Sat down on the porch, let him say what he wanted to say, and head off."

"The Brickers? I don't --"

"You wouldn't. Hasn't been any Brickers or the Brickers for years. They were from Delaware. Quality folks. You didn't hear it at the War Barn place, I guess, although they go down to the Park. Every now and then it starts natural born to the old man's house down and shows it off, but he'll never see it at the place he's going. Mark my words."

The Washburns I had known were people to get along with, but the other two Nick enough people. Although people say that Mrs. Meserve's queer backcountry snobishness will have all the people of the place was maybe an eighth of a mile north of me, and the street. Past that point, there's nothing much, the trip to the beach is steep and the words are massed ranges of sound, and the sound is business. The Street goes into the port Hule Bay, the trip to the Dark Score, but once Line Forty-two, it's back to the beach. The path is for the most part usually by water, packing, especially in the summer and hunters in the fall.

Normal, I thought. He had a native English who had a white infant son under the backyard pump.

"Did he leave a note? Any explanation?"

Nawp. But you'll hear to see what he has to say. I think it's the most likely tale of the house, but I've heard it say, and I've heard myself. I ain't the sensitive type. All I know, and I know it, is that it smells damp, no matter how much I've heard it say. I imagine that's why I go back to the house, and I've heard it say, I get into the wood."

She had set her back down between the Red Oaks and the

picked it up. It was a countrywoman's purse, black, styleless (except for the gold grommets holding the handles on), and utilitarian. She could have carried a good selection of kitchen appliances in there if she had wanted to.

I can't stand here nattering all day long, though, much as I might like to. I got one more place to go before I can call it quits. Summer's harvest time in this part of the world, you know. Now remember to take those cherries in before dark. Mr. Noonan. Don't let 'em get all dewy.

I won't. And I didn't. But when I went out to take them in, dressed in my bathing trunks and coat I with sweat from the oven I'd been working in. I had to get the air conditioner fixed, just *that* to, I saw that something had altered Mrs. M.'s arrangements. My jeans and shirts now hung around the pole. The underwear and socks, which had been decorously hidden when Mrs. M. drove up the driveway in her old Ford, were now on the outside. It was as if my unseen guest—*some* of my unseen guests—was saying ha ha ha.

I went to the library the next day and made renewing my library card my first order of business. Lindy Briggs herself took my four bucks and entered me into the computer, first telling me how sorry she had been to hear about Joe's death. And, as with Bill, I sensed a certain reproach in her tone, as if I were to blame for such improperly delayed condolences. I supposed I was.

Lady, do you have a town history?" I asked when we had finished the proprieties concerning my wife.

We have two, she said, then leaned toward me over the desk, a little woman in a violently patterned sleeveless dress, her hair a gray puffball around her head, her bright eyes swimming behind her bifocals. In a confidential voice she added, "Neither is much good."

"Which one is better?" I asked, matching her tone.

Probably the one by Edward Osteen. He was a summer resident until the mid fifties and lived here full time when he retired. He wrote *Days Since Dawn* in 1965 or '66. He had it privately published because he couldn't find a commercial house that would take it. Even the regional publishers passed." She sighed. "The locals bought it, but that's not many books, is it?"

'No, I suppose not,' I said.

He just won't admit it, either. Not even to his own father, this little black man with a squint and a cane. Still, he tells some good stories. The "Mule" (Duke) was a trick horse, the twister in the game, the one that got away in the 'thirties...

'Anything about Sara and the Red Tops'

[illegible]

So would I, but there were ever made. A *Liberty* *recreation* by George Suters's slavery occurred to me. It was a *recreation* *found* *not just the stereotypical*. What he pointed to Mr. O'Brien recall the name."

Died not a year or two before (and) I bought her a "lake," she said. "Cancer."

"You said there were two histories"

The other one you probably know. It's *HH—The Castle Rock*. Done for the country, it isn't as good as *HH's* best. But Osteen's book isn't very well written. Let's see, in *HH* you get him that much. You should find them on the shelves. So you're shelves with a sign over them which reads *HH's* shelves. So you can circulate. Then she brought it. Although we will keep it. So you nickers you should feel moved to feel that out. So you're shelves.

Mattie was sitting in the bleachers, wearing a faded red baseball cap showing him how to use the bat. He looked at Sam with a grin, smiled, and mouthed the words "Nice!" Right after the lucky grab at Warrington's, presumably, home run, he turned before turning to the other side, as if to show his back to the crowd. lucky or not, it *had* been a nice catch.

* What are you looking for?

I was so deep into the two histories, that I almost forgot to make me join. I turned around and saw that my wife was crying.

wearing some light and pleasant perfume—second that Lindy Briggs was watching us from the main desk, her welcoming smile put away.

"Background on the area where I live," I said. "Old stories. My housekeeper got me interested." Then, in a lower voice: "Teacher's watching. Don't look around."

Mattie looked startled—and I thought, a little worried. As it turned out, she was right to be worried. In a voice that was low pitched, yet still designed to carry at least as far as the desk, she asked if she could test check their books for me. I gave her both. As she picked them up she said in what was almost a conspiratorial whisper: "That lawyer who represented you last Friday got John a private detective. He says they may have found something interesting about the *guardian angel*."

I walked over to the OCEANIC INTEREST shelves with her, hoping I wasn't getting her in trouble, and asked if she knew what the something interesting might be. She shook her head, gave me a professional little librarian's smile, and I went away.

On the ride back to the house, I tried to think about what I'd read but there wasn't much. Osteen was a black writer who had taken odd pictures, and while his stories were colorful, they were also pretty thin on the ground. He mentioned Sara and the Red-Tops, all right—but he referred to them as a Dixie Land octet, and even I knew that wasn't right. The Red-Tops might have played some Dixieland, but they had primarily been a blues group (Friday and Saturday nights—and a gospel group Sunday mornings). Osteen's two-page summary of the Red-Tops story on the FR made it clear that he had heard no one else's covers of Sara's tunes.

He confirmed that a child had died of blood-poisoning caused by a trapped leech, a story which sounded like Brenda Meserve's—but why wouldn't it? Osteen had likely heard it from Mrs. M's father or grandfather. He also said that the boy was Son Tidwell's only child, and that the guitar player's real name was Reginald. The Tidwells had supposedly drifted north from the warehouse district of New Orleans—the back lanes and dead streets which had been known around the turn of the century as Storyville.

There was no mention of Sara and the Red-Tops in the more formal

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[illegible]

Sarah stood front and center, veiled as I had been. The room was not outright spinning, but its periphery felt as if it were in her eyes, and I thought they were like the camera's eye, part of the ones that seem to flow away from every man's face. I followed the poetry and thought I had found a safe place to sit. I had *half a yard left to look over*. I supposed I wanted to know what, and the others, who they had been when they were not poets, if they weren't singing and dancing, why they had left the stage.

Both of her hands were covered with scars and cuts. She played the guitar, the strum on the frets was so loud that it was heard all over the fair. On an October Fair-day in the year 1900. Her fingers were long, artistic, wore a lot of rings. That didn't impress me at that time. She said she wasn't married, at least, and even if she had been married, she wouldn't have been caught in the trap. I didn't even think of her as being one of the blakest. I kept the same old story in my mind that she was a widow. Her eyes. The resemblance was remarkable. I thought they were the eyes of a man and a woman who had been brother and sister, not man and wife.

I thought about how things were in the world, cables that were left in the ground, and I was thinking about Linus Beegles, who was a little later in life, had lost a lot of his education, high-school certification. That worried me.

Then I got back to the house, and all I worried about was my story and the people in it—bags of bones which were putting on flesh daily.

Michael Newman, Max Devore, and Rogette Whitmore played out the horrible little comedy scene Friday evening. Two other things which bear narrating happened before that.

The first was a call from John Storow on Thursday night. I was sitting in front of the TV with a baseball game running soundlessly in front of me (the most important part in which most remote controls come equipped may be the twentieth century's finest invention). I was thinking about Sara Tidwell and Son Tidwell and Son Tidwell's little boy. I was thinking about Storyville, a name any writer just had to love. And in the back of my mind I was thinking about my wife, who had died pregnant.

"Hello?" I said.

"Mike, I have some wonderful news," John said. He sounded near to bursting. "Roméo Bissencette may be a weird name, but there's nothing weird about the detective guy he found for me. His name is George Kennedy. Like the actor. He's good, and he's *not*. This guy could work in New York."

"If that's the highest compliment you can think of, you need to get out of the city more."

He went on as if he hadn't heard. "Kennedy's real job's with a security firm—the other stuff is strictly in the moonlight. Which is a great *ass*, believe me. He got most of this on the phone. I can't believe it."

"What specifically can't you believe?"

"Jackpot, baby. Again he spoke in that tone of greedy satisfaction when I found both troubling and reassuring. Elmer Durgin has done the following things since late May: paid off his car, paid off his camp in Ranger's Lakes, caught up on about ninety years of child support."

"Nobody pays child support for ninety years," I said, but I was just running my mouth to hear it go—to let off some of my own building excitement, in truth. " 'Tain't possible, McGee."

"It is if you have seven kids," John said, and began howling with laughter.

BAG OF BONES

nails that looked polished and prissy "He *don't*," I said.

He is a folk singer, all right, and he is a folk singer in the legitimate sense, but the expressive force of his music comes from the street to the stage. What a blues singer has to keep in mind must have! More useless words! And how I wish I was going along with him. I've said it a couple of times. Keep it like the papers are on the whole, but the people who are completely caught up together, my friend! I've seen it, and I've seen it row sitting down in a Park Avenue car, a few seconds ago, scaring the cleaning ladies.

That doesn't matter though, because what I really like is to be here again. "You see what matters, don't you?"

Yes, I said. How could he be, to step out. Meaning Devereaux is meaning Devereaux. I can understand that. But if it was so, it was so. And both he's at the same time.

Elmer Dargus a little lawyer from a little town just back of the big woods of western Maine that said "How come they never set some guardian angel over me along with the rest of us to look after him?" He also bought a new automobile two weeks ago. It's an outboard Abbe on its over Moss. The car comes in every year as the sort of the ninth and thirty-third year of the year.

If you say so. But my hand is not off it. It's written in the Bible. I've been a knight since I was a boy. I've been a knight since I was a boy.

And he has a full game with a total loss of 100,000 dollars, between the egg and the birds, so we're all lost.

"No?"

"I'm taken with her."

"Her?"

Matthew: "Are you there?" Matthew: "Yes, I am."

Yes, I said. I have spoiled Sam. I put him through as much as an ordinary child, but I have indulged him a little. And that makes what W. C. H. says. My son is a little like John's and at last I have found a little more success.

in Agatha Christie. He was twenty-eight, maybe thirty. The idea that a man twelve years older might be sexually attracted to Mattie had probably never crossed his mind—or maybe just for a second or two there on the common, before he dismissed it as ludicrous. The way Mattie herself had dismissed the idea of Jo and the man in the brown sportcoat.

"I can't do my courtship dance while I'm representing her," he said, "wouldn't be ethical. Wouldn't be safe either. Later, though—you can never tell."

"No," I said, hearing my voice as you sometimes do in moments when you are caught completely flat-footed, hearing it as though it were coming from someone else. Someone on the radio or the record player, maybe. Are these the voices of our dead friends, or just the gramophone? I thought of his hands, the fingers long and slender and without a ring on any of them. Like Sara's hands in that old photo. No, you can never tell."

We said goodbye, and I sat watching the muted baseball game. I thought about getting up to get a beer, but it seemed too far to the refrigerator—a satire, in fact. What I felt was a kind of dull hurt, followed by a better emotion: rueful relief. I guess you'd call it. Was he too old for her? No. I didn't think so. Just about right. Prince Charming No. 2, this time in a three-piece suit. Mattie's luck with men might finally be changing—and if so, I should be glad. I *would* be glad. And relieved. Because I had a book to write—and never mind the look of white sneakers flashing below a red sundress in the deepening gloom, or the ember of her cigarette dancing in the dark.

Still, I felt really sorry for the first time since I saw Kyra marching up the white line of Route 68 in her bathing suit and flip-flops.

You funny little man," said Strickland. "I left the empty room. It came out before I knew I was going to say anything—and when it did, the channel on the TV changed. It went from baseball to a rerun of *Adventures in Paradise* at 11:30, to *Don & Stephen*. I glanced down at the remote control. It was still on the coffee table where I left it. The TV channel changed again—and this time I was looking at Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. There was an airplane in the background, and I didn't need to pick up the remote and turn on the sound to know that

Hamplrey was still in. Ingrid that she was out. At
wife's all time favorite movie. She made it through it.

"Jo?" I asked. "Are you here?"

Bunter's bell rang once. Very faintly. There had been several pres-
ences in the house. I was sure of it. But I was positive it was Jo who was with me.

"Who was he, then?" I asked. The door at the end of the hallway
he?"

Bunter's bell rang still. And Jack. She was still there. I
sensed her, something like a held breath.

I remembered the days going. The days of the past. I
my dinner with Mattie and Kai: *blue rose liar ba ha*

"Who was he?" My voice was unstable. I was crying. I
tears. What were you doing down here with some guy? What were you
But I couldn't bring myself to ask if she had been going to the hospital
on me. I couldn't ask even though the past was a terrible thing to do
it, only in my own head.

The TV switched away from *Law & Order* to a series of
favorite lawyer, Perry Mason. On Nick at Nite. Perry Mason's friend
ton Barger was questioning a straight looking guy. I didn't know
once the sound blared on, making me jump.

"I am not a liar," some long-haired TV actress said. I didn't know
looked right out at me, and I was stunned breathless. I saw
that black and white test face. I saw that Mr. Barger was

"Is he it that you die?" Barger's voice. He was. He was
ing like a vampire. "I submit that you—"

The TV suddenly went off. Bunter's bell rang. I was
and then whatever had been here was gone. But I felt like a
liar . . . I never lied, never

I could believe that if I chose to

If I chose,

I went to bed, and there were no dreams

I had taken to starting work every day. I had taken to
in the studio. I had no more peace. I had no more trust. I had no

the IBM until almost noon, watching the Courier ball dance and twirl as the pages floated through the machine and came out with writing on them. That old magic, so strange and wonderful. It never really felt like work to me, although I called it that, it felt like some weird kind of mental trampoline I bounced on. These were springs that took away all the weight of the world for awhile.

At noon I'd break, drive down to Buddy Jellison's greasart room for something tasty, then return and work for another hour or so. After that I would swim and take a long creaminess nap in the north bedroom. I occasionally poked my head into the master bedroom at the south end of the house, and if Mrs. M. thought this was odd, she kept it to herself.

On Friday the seventeenth, I stopped at the Lakeview General, on my way back to the house to gas up my Chevrolet. There are pumps at the All-Purpose Garage, and the gas price was a penny or two cheaper, but I didn't like the vibe. Today, as I stood in front of the store with the pump on automatic feed, looking off toward the mountains, Bill Dean's Dodge Ram pulled in on the other side of the island. He climbed down and gave me a smile. "How's it going, Mike?"

"Pretty fair."

"Brenda says you're writin' up a storm."

I am, I said, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask for an update on the broken second-floor air conditioner. The tip of my tongue was where it stayed. I was still too nervous about my re-secured ability to want to change anything about the environment in which I was doing it. Stupid, maybe, but sometimes things work just because you think they work. It's as good a definition of faith as any.

Well, I'm glad to hear it. Very glad. I thought he was sincere enough, but he somehow didn't sound like Bill. Not the one who had greeted me back, anyway.

I've been looking up some nesting sites about my side of the lake, I said. Saw a lot of Red-Tails. You always were sort of interested in them, I remember."

Then, yes, but don't use them. Lots of history. I was talking to Mrs. M., and she told me about Normal Auster, Kenny's father."

Bill's smile stayed on, and he only paused a moment in the act of

unscrewing the top of the gas tank, but I said, "Just that it had to get fixed. You would fix it, wouldn't you?" "Miser because there's a lot of people out there that do it bad and take it wrong. I told Jo the same thing."

Jo said, "I'll be an angel to stop between the two gas tanks and make sure the gas tank is not leaking. What's Jo going to do?"

He looked at me cautiously, saying, "She's not going to do anything. What are you talking about?"

She thought she might write something about Sam and the Top for one of the local papers. But was looking at my story, saying, "I have a clear memory of that, and I know it's not true. It was a dark cloud on my neck, and the darkness of our shadows on the ground. He began to pump his gas, and the sound of the pump was not very strong. I think she's very intelligent. I don't think I am."

I was speechless. Why would she have kept quiet about the story? Why not hand it at a little local mystery? Because she might have thought she was preaching to my territory? That was not a good idea. She had known me better than that... hadn't she?

When did you have this conversation? Bill De Vries asked.

Coss I do, he said. Same day she came down to the delivery of these plastic cows. Only, I raised the subject because she was asking around.

"Prying?"

"I didn't say that," he said stiffly, "you did."

True, but I thought prying was what he meant. "Go on."

Nothing to go on about. I told her there were a few stories out there, and the TR same as there are any place. It's not her job to tell me any corns if she can help it. She said, "I'm not sure I know." Maybe she didn't. A. I know she's a good person, and I don't want to tell stories from old fools with more time than sense."

"When was this?"

End of the winter and spring. We were in the car, and she was driving. Morton told me, "I was in the car with her, and the tape recorder. Anyway, that's all I know."

I realized a stunning thing: Bill was lying. If you'd asked me before that day, I'd have laughed and told you Bill Dean didn't have a lie in him. And he must not have had many, because he did it badly.

I thought of calling him on it, but to what end? I needed to think, and I couldn't do it here—my mind was roaring. Given time, that roar might subside and I'd see it was really nothing, no big deal, but I needed that time. When you start finding out unexpected things about a loved one who's been dead awhile, it racks you. Take it from me, it does.

Bill's eyes had shifted away from mine, but now they shifted back. He looked both earnest and—I could have sworn it—a little scared.

She just about let it Kerry Auster, and that's a good example of what I mean about stepping on sore toes. That's not the stuff for a newspaper story or a magazine article. Normal just snapped. No one knows why. It was a terrible tragedy, senseless, and there's still people who could be hurt by it. In little towns things are kind of connected under the surface.

Yes, like cables you couldn't quite see.

and the past goes slower. Sara and those others—that's a little different. They were just—just wanderers—from away. You'd have stuck to those folks and it would've been all right. And say—for all I know she did. Because I never saw a single word she ever wrote. If she did write—

About that he was telling the truth, I felt. But I knew something else, knew it as surely as I'd known Mattie had been wearing white shorts when she called me on her day off. *Never did you expect it to happen, did you?* Bill had said, but he hesitated in the middle of his thought, struggling to find a word for the word which had come naturally to mind. *Never* was the word he hadn't said. *Never* is a little bit better, but it doesn't fit from away.

All at once I found myself thinking of an old story by Ray Bradbury, *Mars Is Heaven*. The first space travelers to Mars discover it's Green Town, Illinois, and all their well-loved friends and relatives are there. Only the friends and relatives are really alien monsters, and in the night, while the space travelers think they are sleeping in the beds of their long-dead kinsfolk in a place that must be heaven, they are slaughtered to the last man.

BAG OF BONDS

"Bill, you're sure she was up here a few times in the off season?"

Again, I was a regular customer. I was there 100 times or more. Day-trips, don't you know

$$[D_{i,j} \in \mathcal{V}_{i,j} \cup \mathcal{V}_{i,j} \cap S_{i,j} \mid i, j \in \mathcal{V}] = \mathcal{V} \cup \mathcal{V} \cap S \quad (5)$$

Her countess said I saw her every day. I saw her every day on his head. "Few times I saw her, she was alone. But I did not see her every time she came. She was alone, and I did not see her. The countess was gone again. Saw her in June. She was alone, and I did not see her. That little car a hers. She waved, I waved back. Went down to the house later that evening to see if she was alone. I did not see her. I did not see her again. When she died after her husband died, I was shocked."

It is likely that the author of the manuscript would have found the manuscript

Was that true though? Since my home trips were never apparent attempts at concealment, on one of the visits I had been accompanied by a strange man, and I had not been on any of the visits by accident.

This is hard to task alone. But I know that once I'm in bed, I can't sleep. I know how hard we might as well go the rest of the way. I don't see the difference. The only way we used to sleep four or even five months. I was in the hospital in January and the true cold. If everyone rests as much as I do, I can't be a doctor. But I'm not. I'm a restless, gets to sleeping and I turn in on my own. I don't sleep. I'm the restless one. That's how people see it."

He wanted to see what I said. When I saw the teacher without a word from me, he let Olu know I was still there. He shuffled his feet and went on.

There are people in town as well as in the courts. Matt DeVore, for instance, New Hampshire's attorney general, is caught between the two schools. Devo's father, a Republican, says he wants to stay in the Tea Party. But he says he doesn't want to stay in the Tea Party.

'Why?'

(C) $m \leq k$, $k \leq r$, $w \leq l$, $a \leq s$, $l \leq d$, $w \leq k$, $a \leq t$, $r \leq s$, $s \leq d$, $t \leq l$.

As I recall, Bill, you said you were in the Army
before you got to The University of Chicago.

"I seem to recall telling you that Max Devore is nuts," he said. "If you make him mad, we all pay the price. The pump clicked off and he racked it up. Then he sighed, raised his hands, dropped them. You think this is easy for me to say?"

"You think it's easy for me to listen to?"

All right, again, we're in the same skiff. But Mattie Devore isn't the only person in the TR I'm hand to mouth, you know. There's others got their woes, as well. Can't you understand that?"

Maybe he saw that I understood too much and too well because his shoulders slumped.

If you're asking me to stand aside and let Devore take Mattie's baby with at a fight, you can forget it, I said. "And I hope that's not it. Because I think I'd have to be quits with a man who'd ask another man to do something like that."

I wouldn't ask it now anyway, he said, his accent thickening almost to the point of contempt. "It'd be too late, wouldn't it? And then, unexpectedly, he softened. "Christ, man. I'm worried about *you*. Let the rest of it go, hang, all right? Hang high where the crows can pick it." He was lying again, but this time I didn't mind so much, because I thought he was lying to himself. But you *had* to have a care. When I said Devore was crazy, that was no figure of speech. Do you think he'll better wait a court, a court can't get him what he wants? Folks died in those summer fires back in 1935. Good people. One related to me. They burned over half the gas farm county and Max Devore set 'em. That was a's going away present to the TR. It could never be proved, but he did it. Back then he was young and broke, not yet twenty and no law in his pocket. What do you think he'd do now?"

He looked at me searchingly. I said nothing.

Bill nodded as if I *had* spoken. "Think about it. And you remember it's Mike, a man who can't care for you, would ever talk to you straight as I have."

How straight was that, Bill? I was faintly aware of some tourist walking from his DeVore's tire store and looking at us curiously, and when I replayed the scene in my mind later on, I realized we must have looked like gays on the verge of a fistfight. I remember that I felt like crying out at

Silence from the other end. With a hand that seemed at least four miles down my arm, I plucked the tax sheets out of the basket. Ten of them. November of 1993 to August of 1994. Jottings everywhere in Jo's neat hand. Had we even had a fax before she died? I couldn't remember. There was so much I couldn't remember.

"Bonnie? If you know something, please tell me. Jo's dead, but I'm not. I can't forgive her if I have to, but I can't forgive what I don't understand."

"I'm sorry," she said, and gave a nervous little laugh. "It's just that I didn't understand at first. 'Seeing anyone'—that was just so—so foreign to Jo—the Jo I knew—that I couldn't figure out what you were talking about. I thought maybe you meant a shrink, but you didn't, did you? You meant seeing someone like seeing a guy. A boyfriend."

That's what I meant. Thumbing through the faxed calendar sheets now, my hand not quite back to its proper distance from my eyes but getting there, getting there. I felt react at the honest bewilderment in Bonnie's voice, but not as much as I'd expected. Because I'd known. I hadn't even needed the woman in the old *Root Manor* episode to put in her two cents, not really. It was Jo we were talking about, after all. *Jo*.

"Mike—Bonnie was saying, very softly, as if I might be crazy, 'she loved you. She loved you.'"

Yes. I suppose she did. The attendant pages showed how busy my wife had been. How productive. S.K.s of Maine—the soup kitchens, Women's Aid, a county-to-county network of shelters for battered women, TeenSaid, Friends of McLibby. She had been at two or three meetings a month, two or three *ad hoc* at some points—and I'd barely noticed. I had been too busy with my women in jeopardy. I loved her too, Bonnie, but she was up to something in the last ten months of her life. She didn't give you any hint of what it might have been when you were riding to meetings of the Soup Kitchens board or the Friends of Maine Libraries?

Silence from the other end.

"Bonnie?"

I took the phone away from my car to see if the red LOW BATTERY light was on, and it squawked my name. I put it back.

"Bonnie, what is it?"

BAG OF BONES

There are no longer as there once were. And in the phone, no longer as it was. And in the house, there *were* no long drives. She quit.

It should be emphasized that $M = 0.25$ is a very small value. So, a kinetic analysis of $M = 0.25$ is not valid.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Another member states that she was at the N. M. She quotes of them she was with W. and S. and S. at the end of her term was present. The N. M. Kitchens and Friends of Mary L. Forres - she was in O. in November of 1993."

Meetings in federal district courts Ward was back District Court. Meetings in 1993, meetings in 1994. Meetings that she no longer belonged. She had been down, and O'Connell, the meeting-days, had been in the TR. I was in the TR.

But why?

CHAPTER

17

Devere was mad, all right, mad as a hatter, and he couldn't have caught me at a worse, weaker, more terrified moment. And I think that everything from that moment on was almost pre-ordained. From there to the terrible storm they still talk about in this part of the world, it all came down like a rockslide.

I felt fine the rest of Friday afternoon—my talk with Bonnie left a lot of questions unanswered, but it had been a tonic, just the same. I made a vegetable stir fry, an experiment for my latest plunge into the Fry-O-Lator at the Village Cafe, and ate it while I watched the evening news. On the other side of the lake the sun was shining down toward the mountains and throwing the living room with gold. When Tom Brokaw closed up shop, I decided to take a walk north along Tie Street—I'd go as far as I could and still be assured of getting home by dark, and as I went I'd think about the things Bud Dean and Bonnie Amadson had told me. I'd think about them the way I sometimes walked and thought about plot snags in whatever I was working on.

I walked down the railroad-tie steps, still feeling perfectly fine (confused, but fine), started off along Tie Street, then paused to look at the

STEPHEN KING

*blue-cap man say git me
blue-cap man say dassn't let me ramble
help I m drown
lost my berries they on the path
be holdn me
be face shimmer n look bad
lemme up lemme up O sweet Jesus lemme up
oxen free allee allee oxen free PLEASE*

*OXEN FREE you go on and stop now ALLS I XEN FREE
she scream my name
she scream it so LOUD*

I bent forward in an utter panic, opened my mouth, and from my gaping, straining mouth there poured a cold flood of
Nothing at all.

The horror that passed and yet it couldn't pass. I st. I felt terribly sick to my stomach, as if I had eaten something to which my body had taken a violent offense—some kind of ant powder or maybe a killer mushroom of the kind Jesus taught gaudes pictured inside red borders. I staggered forward half a dozen steps, gagging dryly from a throat which still believed it was wet. There was another to run where the bank dropped to the lake, arching its white belly gracefully over the water as if to see its reflection by evening's fluttering light. I grabbed it like a drunk grabbing a lamp post.

The pressure in my chest began to ease, but it left an ache as real as rain. I hung against the tree, heart fluttering, and suddenly I became aware that something stank—an evil, polluted smell worse than a clogged septic pool which has simmered all summer under the blazing sun. With it was a sense of some hideous presence giving off that odor, something which should have been dead and wasn't.

Get up, get out of here. I'll catch this only if p. I tried to say, and still nothing came out. Then it was gone. I could smell nothing but the lake and the woods—but I could see something: a boy in the lake, a little drowned dark boy lying on his back. His cheeks were puffed out. His mouth hung slackly open. His eyes were as white as the eyes of a statue.

My mouth fixed with the unmerciful iron of the lake again. Help me

the computerized avoidance system, I guessed. Maybe even an autopilot. The armrests were wide and covered with controls. Holstered on the left side of this machine was a green oxygen tank four feet long. A hose went to a clear plastic accordion tube, the accordion tube led to a mask which rested in Devore's lap. It made me think of the old guy's Steen mask. Comparing the facts of what had just happened, I might have considered this Tim Clancyish vehicle a hallucination, except for the bumper sticker on the nacelle, below the dish: I BLEED DOG FLECK BLOOD, it said.

This evening the woman I had seen outside The Sunset Bar at Warrenton's was wearing a white blouse with long sleeves and black pants so tapered they made her legs look like sheathed swords. Her narrow face and hollow cheeks made her resemble Edward Munch's screamer more than ever. Her white hair hung around her face in a lank cowl. Her lips were painted so brightly red she seemed to be bleeding from the mouth.

She was old and she was ugly, but she was a prize compared to Mattie's tattoo-in-law. Scrawny, blue-lipped, the skin around his eyes and the corners of his mouth a dark exploded purple, he looked like something an archaeologist might find in the barabaroom of a pyramid, surrounded by his statted wives and pets, bejeweled with his favorite jewels. A few wisps of white hair still clung to his scaly skull, more tufts sprang from enormous ears which seemed to have melted like wax sculptures left out in the sun. He was wearing white cotton pants and a billowy blue shirt. Add a little black beret and he would have looked like a French artist from the nineteenth century at the end of a very long life.

A tressy slip was a cane of some black wood. Snagged over the end was a bright red bicycle grip. The fingers grasping it looked powerful, but they were going as slack as the cane itself. His circulation was failing, and I couldn't imagine what his feet and his lower legs must look like.

"Whore run off and left you, has she?"

I tried to say something. A croak came out of my mouth, nothing more. I was still holding the baren. I let go of it and tried to straighten up, but my legs were still weak and I had to grab it again.

He nudged a silver toggle switch and the chair came ten feet closer, narrowing the distance between us. The sound it made was a silky whisper, watching it was like watching an evil magic carpet. Its many wheels rose

'What do you want?' I took a breath — and caught a taste of that putrescence again. I gagged. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it.

Devere straightened in his chair and breathed deeply, as if to mock me. In that moment he looked like Robert Davail in *Apocalypse Now*, striding along the beach and telling the world how much he loved the smell of napalm in the morning. His grin widened. 'Lovely place, just here, isn't it? A cozy spot to stop and think, wouldn't you say?' He looked around. 'This is where it happened, all right. Ayuh.

'Where the boy drowned.'

I thought it. Watmore's smile looked momentarily uneasy at that. Devere didn't. He clutched for his translucent oxygen mask with an old man's overwide grip, fingers that grope rather than reach. I could see little bubbles of mucus clinging to the inside. He sucked deep again, put it down again.

'Thirty or more folks have drowned in this lake, and that's just the ones they know about,' he said. 'What's one boy more or less?'

I don't get it. Were there *fit*— I'll call boys who died here? The one that got blood poisoning and the one—'

Days away, about your soul. Mr Noonan? Your immortal soul? God's butterfly caught in a cocoon of flesh that will soon stink like mine?'

I said nothing. The strangeness of what had happened before he arrived I was missing. What replaced it was his incredible personal magnetism. I have never in my life felt so much raw force. There was nothing supernatural about it, either, and *raw* is exactly the right word. I might have run. Under other circumstances, I'm sure I would have. It certainly wasn't bravery that kept me where I was, my legs still felt rabby, and I was afraid I might fall down.

I'm going to give you one chance to save your soul,' Devere said. He raised a bony finger to illustrate the concept of one. 'Go away, my fine whoremaster. Right now, in the clothes you stand up in. Don't bother to pack a bag, don't even stop to make sure you're freed of the stove-burners. Go. Leave the whore and leave the whorelet.'

'Leave them to you.'

Ayuh, to me. I'll do the things that need to be done. Souls are for liberal arts majors, Noonan, I was an engineer.'

"Go fuck yourself."

Roger Whitmore said that to me.

The letter sat on his table and I

me and looking in a sort of daze from the door. And

want to be the one Noonan. It was not for me.

or me, it's all the same to her."

I don't know what I said. I don't know what I did.

and this time the artist's hand that I had seen before

and my legs were a right to. And I don't know

Kate Never in her life had seen me so before.

Pal you'd say pretty. Dave said that to me.

of the guns. Before I was I was a

was you tripped the line. As for the other

"I'm going home. Let me pass."

Go home then. Now could I say to you

belongs to everyone. He kept the

and took an other nearby. He kept the

left hand on the arm of his Black Rogers

I stepped forward, hit him, and

ing he ran the whole chair off me. He

quite badly broken. He

stopped. I started. I leaped back

was aware that Whitmore was laughing again.

"What's the matter, Noonan?"

"Get out of my way, I'm warning you."

"Whore made you jumpy, has she?"

I started to run, but he

he had turned the chair, shot it forward, and cut me off.

"Get out of the TR, Noonan. I'm giving you good ad—"

I broke to the right. This time

slipped by him quite

hammer, the left side of my

aring and the stone

flower bed. I put the stick

to the needle. I put the stick

next instant something clouted me on the back of the head. A momentary orange glow lit up my sight. I staggered backward in what felt like slow motion, waving my arms, and Devore came into view again. He was blue-faced and in his wheelchair, scaly head thrust forward, the cane and hit me with still upraised. If he had been ten years younger, I believe he would have fractured my skull instead of just creating that momentary orange light.

I ran into my old friend the birch tree. I raised my hand to my ear and looked unbelievably at the blood on the tips of my fingers. My head ached from the blow he had fetched me.

Whitmore was struggling to her feet, brushing pine needles from her slacks and looking at me with a furious smile. Her cheeks had filled in with a thin pink flush. Her too-red lips were pulled back to show small teeth. In the light of the setting sun her eyes looked as if they were burning.

Get out of my way, I said, but my voice sounded small and weak.

No, Devore said, and had the black barrel of his cane on the nacelle that curved over the front of his chair. Now I could see the little boy who had been determined to have the sled no matter how badly he cut his hands getting it. I could see him very clearly. No, you were fucking sissy, I want."

He shoved the silver toggle switch again and the wheelchair rushed savagely at me. If I had stayed where I was, he would have run me through with his cane as surely as any eye-dake was ever run through in an Alexandre Dumas story. He probably would have crushed the fragile bones in his right hand and torn his right arm clean out of its socket in the collision, but this man had never cared about such things. He left cost-counting to the little people. If I had hesitated out of shock or incredulity he would have killed me, I'm sure of it. Instead, I rolled to my left. My sneakers slid on the needle-slippery embankment for a moment. Then they lost contact with the earth, and I was falling.

I hit the water awkwardly and much too close to the bank. My left foot struck a submerged root and twisted. The pain was huge, something that felt like a thunder-lap sounds. I opened my mouth to scream and the lake poured in—that cold metallic dark taste, this time for real. I

I looked around, hoping to see a strolling couple or perhaps a fisherman looking for a place where he could wet his line one more time before dark—and yet at the same time I hoped I'd see no one. I was angry, hurt, and scared. Most of all I was embarrassed. I had been dunked in the lake by a man of eighty-five—a man who showed every sign of hanging around and making sport of me.

I began wading to my right—soata, back toward my house. The water was about waist-deep, cool and almost refreshing now that I was used to it. My sneakers squelched over rocks and submerged tree-branches. The ankle I'd twisted still hurt, but it was supporting me. Whether it would continue to once I got out of the lake was another question.

Devore twiddled his controls some more. The chair pivoted and came rolling slowly along The Street, keeping pace with me easily.

"I didn't introduce you properly to Rogette, did I?" he said. "Sae was quite an athlete in college; you know Softball and field hockey were her specialties, and she's held onto—at least some—of her skills. Rogette demonstrate your skills for this young man."

When we passed the slowly moving wheelchair on the left. For a moment she was blocked out by it. When I could see her again, I could also see what she was holding. She hadn't been bent over to get her breath.

Smiling, she strode to the edge of the embankment with her left arm curled against her midriff, cracking the rocks she had picked up from the edge of the path. She selected a chunk roughly the size of a golfball, drew her hand back to her ear, and threw it at me. Hard. It whizzed by my left temple and I spasmed into the water behind me.

"Hey!" I shouted, more startled than afraid. Even after everything that had preceded it, I couldn't believe this was happening.

"What's wrong with you, Rogette?" Devore asked chidingly. "You never used to throw like a girl. Get him!"

The second rock passed two inches over my head. The third was a potential tooth's naiser. I batted it away with an angry, fearful soata, not noticing until later that it had bruised my palm. At the moment I was only aware of her hateful, smiling face—the face of a woman who has plunked down two dollars in a carnny shooting pitch and means to win the big stuffed teddybear even if she has to blast away all night.

nist — one from Devore's cane — one rock — or had it been two of Christ, I couldn't remember.

Get behind you and for God's sake — you're not a doctor — let him put you through surgery or — Doctor — it like to sit with my head down!

No, not if I could help it.

I tried water and ran my left hand down the back of my head. Not too far above the nape I encountered a goose egg that it was still rising. When I pressed on it the pain made me feel like throwing up and fainting at the same time. Tears rose in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. There were only traces of blood on the tips of my fingers when I looked at them, but it was hard to tell about cuts when you were in the water.

You look like a woodchuck caught out in the rain, Noonan! Newns voice seemed to roll to where I was, as if across a great distance.

"Fuck you!" I called. "I'll see you in jail for this!"

He looked at Whitmore. She looked back with an identical expression, and they both laughed. If someone had put an Uzi in my hands at that moment, I would have killed them both without hesitation and then asked for a second clip so I could maximize gun the noises.

With no Uzi to hand, I began to dogpaddle south, toward my house. They paced me along The Street, he rolling in his own spindly wheel-chair, she walking beside him as solemn as a nun and pausing every now and then to pick up a likely looking rock.

I hadn't swum enough to be tired, but I was. It was mostly shock, I suppose. Finally I tried to draw a breath at the wrong time, swallowed more water, and panicked completely. I began to swim in, toward the shore, wanting to get to where I could stand up. Rogette Whitmore began to fire rocks at me immediately, first using the ones she had lined up between her left arm and her midriff, then those she'd stockpiled in Devore's lap. She was warmed up, she wasn't throwing like a girl anymore, and her arm was deadly. Stones splashed all around me. I batted another away — a big one that likely would have cut open my forehead if it had hit — but her follow-up struck my nose and tore a long scratch there. Enough. I rolled over and swam back at beyond her range, gasping for breath, trying to keep my head up in spite of the growing ache in the back of my neck.

if no one will use The Street on FRIDAY EVENING, THE
17th OF JULY between the hours of SEVEN and NINE
PM. Keep our "SUMMER FRIENDS" away too! And
remember GOOD MARTIANS are like GOOD MONKEYS
they SEE no evil, HEAR no evil, and SPEAK no evil!

I couldn't really believe it, not even in my current situation—and yet I almost could. At the very least I had to grant him the luck of the devil.

Tired. My sneakers heavier than ever. I tried to push one of them off and succeeded only in taking in another mouthful of lakewater. They stood watching me. Devore occasionally picking the mask up from his lap and having a revivifying suck.

I couldn't wait until dark. The sun exits in a hurry here in western Maine—as it does, I guess, in mountain country everywhere—but the twilights are long and lingering. By the time it got dark enough in the west to move without being seen, the moon would have risen in the east.

I found myself imagining my obituary in the *New York Times*—the headline reading JOPLIN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELIST DROWNS IN WAINE. Debra Weinstock would provide them with the author photo from the forthcoming *Heart's Presence*. Harold Oblowski would say all the right things, and he'd also remember to put a modest (but not tiny) donation in *Pullout Weekly*. He would go half-and-half with Putnam on it, and—

I sank, swallowed more water, and spat it out. I began pummeling the lake again and forced myself to stop. From the shore I could hear Rogett Whitmore's tinkling laughter. *Yo-ho-ho*. I thought. *Yo-scooter-yo*.

Mike, Jo said.

Her voice was in my head, but it wasn't the one I make when I'm imagining her side of a mental dialogue or when I just miss her and need to distract myself for awhile. As if to underline this, something splashed to my right, splashed hard. When I looked in that direction I saw no fish, not even a ripple. What I saw instead was our swimming float, anchored about a hundred yards away in the sunset-colored water.

"I can't swim that far, baby," I croaked.

Did you say something, Neonate? Devore called from the shore. He

BAG OF BONES

upped some kind of note from the other side of the bag, but I was too
quite make it out. You see, I don't know what the other man was
in Whitmore. He was Jimmy Crenshaw, the one who said "M.M."

You can make it. I'll help you.

The flapping of the bag made it difficult to hear anything, but I
one on this part of the sack. It was a long, narrow, and very thin, with
more's longest tickles in it. I remember that when I was in the water
my arms it was as if they were my feet. I was so tired that I was
of going under I passed the line that was the edge of the water.
was in pretty good shape, not being so tired as I had been before.
ponic I'd be all right. The kids that were in the water were
pacing me, but they saw where I was and they were not
So did the taunts.

For a long time I was swimming, but I was so tired that I was
myself that was just as well. I was so tired that I was not
draining from red to purple to a dark black. I was so tired
Devere's game, but I was able to master it. I was so tired that I was
idea as my breath shortened and my arms grew heavier.

When I was still thirty yards away from the shore, I felt a
saw ways like a swimmer's. I was trying to find a way to the shore.
More water poured down my chin. I tried to find a way to the shore,
refused, and went under with my stomach still full of air. I was
fingers still looking for the key to the place where I was.

*In really, however, I thought I was a very good swimmer. I was
pening. This is how it happens, this is it.*

Then I felt a hand seize me by the back of the head. I was so tired
ing my hair yanked brought me back to reality. I was so tired that
than an epileptic in a seizure. I felt as if I was in a seizure. I was
let there was a light but terrible sense of heat. I was so tired that
broke the surface swimming. I was so tired that I was
padding, and in a way, I was so tired that I was
on the side of the boat, breathing in the air. I was so tired that
said I was going to be a swimmer. I was so tired that I was
my chest like a hand. I had a hand. I was so tired that I was
oxygen was, and everything was in the air. I was so tired that I was

minute, then climbed out of the water and into what was now the ashes at twilight. I stood facing west for a little while, bent over with my hands on my knees, dipping on the boards. Then I turned around, meaning this time to flip them not just a single bird but that tabled double eagle. There was no one to flip it to. The Street was empty. Devore and Rogerette Whitmore were gone.

Alma, they were gone. I did want to remember there was a lot of Street I couldn't see.

I sat cross-legged on the float until the moon rose, waiting and watching for any movement. Half an hour, I think. Maybe forty-five minutes. I checked my watch, but got no help there; it had shipped some water and stopped at 7:31 PM. To the other satisfactions Devore owed me I could now add the price of one Timex Indiglo—that's \$29.95, asshole, cough it up.

At last I climbed back down the ladder, slipped into the water, and stroked for shore as quietly as I could. I was rested; my head had stopped aching (although the knot above the nape of my neck still tickled steadily), and I no longer felt off balance and incredulous. In some ways, that had been the worst of it—trying to cope not just with the apparition of the drowned boy, the flying rocks, and the lake—but with the pervasive sense that none of this could be happening, that rich and software magicians did not try to drown novelists who strayed into their line of sight.

Had tonight's adventure been a case of simple straying into Devore's view, though? A coincidental meeting, no more than that? Wasn't it likely I'd been having me watched ever since the Fourth of July—maybe from the other side of the lake, by people with high-powered optical equipment? Paranoia, I would have said—at least I would have said it before the two of them almost sank me in Dark Score Lake like a kid's paper boat in a mudpuddle.

I decided I didn't care who might be watching from the other side of the lake. I didn't care if the two of them were still lurking on one of the tree-shaded parts of The Street either. I swam until I could feel strands of waterweed tickling my ankles and see the crescent of my beach. Then

BAG OF BONES

I stood up, wincing at the row which I was with, and I took
to shore one hand raised to steady myself, and I
stood for a moment on the Street, my hand on the wall,
working first one way then the other. It seemed to me that I
word to myself. Last I looked back, and I saw that I had
beat a track from the tharab and out to the river, and I
I thank, for I said they started on the road, and I saw
got away at half way, then had the spirit and saw I was
utterly tired in my whole life.

CHAPTER

18

I almost forgot to go to the deck instead of going around to the front door still moving slowly and marvelling at how my legs felt twice their normal weight. When I stepped into the living room I looked around with the wide eyes of someone who has been away for a decade and returns to find everything just as he left it. Battered the mouse on the wall, the *Best of Gosh* on the couch, a compilation of *Los Angeles* crossword puzzles on the end table, the plate on the counter with the remains of my stir-fry still on it. Looking at these things brought the realization home that I really had gone for a walk, leaving all this normal light chatter behind, and had almost died instead. Had almost been murdered.

I began to shake. I went into the north wing bathroom, took off my wet clothes, and threw them into the tub. Then, still shaking, I turned and stared at myself in the mirror over the washbasin. I looked like someone who has been on the losing side in a barroom brawl. One cheek bore a winged, cutting gash. A blackish-purple bruise was a startling white looked like smoky wings on my left cheekbone. There was a bloody tear on my neck and behind my ear where the lovely Rogette had caught me with the stone in her ring.

an ep n line. I took the handset away from my ear, stared at it for a moment, and then set it gently back down in its cradle.

I'm not a sissy about the sometimes whimsical, sometimes hateful attention of the press, but I'm wary, as I would be around a bad-tempered ter-bearing mammal. America has turned the people who entertain it into weird high-class whores, and the media jeers at any celeb who dares complain about his or her treatment. 'Quitcha bit ain' cry the newspapers and the TV gossip saows (the tone is one of mingled triumph and indignation). 'Did a really think we paid ya the big bucks just to sing a song or swing a Louisville Slugger? Writng, asshole. We pay so we can be amazed when you do it well—whatever it happens to be in your particular case—and also because it's gratifying when you fuck up. The truth is you're supposed to. If you cease to be a nusing, we can always kill you and eat you.'

They can't *eat* eat you, of course. They can print pictures of you with your shirt off and say you're running to fat; they can talk about how much you drink or how many pills you take or snicker about the night you paled some starlet onto your lip at Spago and tried to stick your tongue in her ear, but they can't really eat you. So it wasn't the thought of the *P* eating me a crybaby or being a part of Jay Leno's opening monologue that made me put the phone down; it was the realization that I had no proof. No one had seen us. And I realized, finding an alibi for himself and his personal assistant would be the easiest thing in the world for Max Devore.

There was one other thing, too, the copper imagining the County Sheriff sending out George Footman—aka daddy, to take my statement on how the mean man had knocked L.L. Mikey into the lake. How the three of them would laugh later about that?

I called Joan Stronow instead, wanting him to tell me I was doing the right thing—the only thing that made any sense. Wanting him to remind me that my desperate men were driven to such desperate lengths, I would ignore, at least for the time being, how the two of them had laughed, as if they were having the time of their lives, and that nothing had changed in regard to Ki Devore—her grandfather's custody case still sucked bogwater.

BAG OF BONES

Take the instructions given in the following example and just call Mike Norman's emergency contact number. I will then call that number and the cops will come and arrest the person. Lawyers work until they drop a buster. Then the cops will come and follow instructions and punch the number of the first three letters of John's last name.

There was a glitch in my schedule that I can't blame on the weather, unfortunately. Here, this is John Stewart. I've been in the "P" line this weekend to see my mom and dad. I've got to be in Miami for the rest of the week. I'll be out of business from Tuesday through, you'll probably have the most luck trying to reach me at .

The number he gave me was 777-0338, which I later found Koolhaas imagined it was the act where he stayed but not the actual address of the View. Mike Norman told me, "Call him whenever you feel like it. I'll pass a message on your apartment machine, too."

I went in the kitchen to get a beer from my stool I fell off and hit
the refrigerator playing with the magnets. When I got back it hurt
me. So I took the magnet off and it was gone. A minute later I had
stuffed to save my skin. Quite funny really, like you do. You need to
take care of your doctor's advice. He put
some *on* *it*. My little hand says "You're
grandfather shit in the same bit.

Left the freight with a truck on its side and I saw a car with a phone, and called Mattie.

He said another obvious reason we were so late was that I was not either I could or not able to contact him in the night time to let him know the message okay. A week then, making sure that we had a good time. Kyra said she almost blew my car off the road. What followed was laughter from everyone in the room for the next

"Hi, Mattie, it's Mike Noonan," I said. "I just wanted . . ."

I don't know how I would have finished that thought if I had to have to. There was a click behind me. I turned to see a little Mrs. There was something different about her, about her face, her voice and the cheerful gleam in the depths of her eyes. I said, "Hello." Then I asked her what was wrong.

Nothing, she said, then began to cry. "Everything. I lost my job. Linda fired me."

Fitting wasn't what Lindy had called it, of course. She'd called it "belt-tightening," but it was fitting, all right, and I knew that if I looked into the funding of the Four Lakes Consolidated Library, I would discover that one of the chief supporters over the years had been Mr. Max Devore. And he'd continue to be one of the chief supporters. . . . It, that was Lindy Briggs played ball.

"We shouldn't have talked where she could see us doing it," I said, knowing I could have stayed away from the library completely and Mattie would be just as gone. And we probably should have seen this coming."

Jean Storrow *did* see it. She was still crying, but making an effort to get it under control. He said Max Devore would probably want to make sure I was as deep in the corner as he could push me, come the custody hearing. He said Devore would want to make sure I answered 'I'm unemployed.' Year after year, when the judge asked where I worked, I told Jean Mrs. Briggs would never do anything so low, especially to a girl who'd given such a brilliant talk on Melville's 'Bartley'. Do you know what he told me?

'No.'

He said, "You're very young. I thought that was a patronizing thing to say, but he was right, wasn't he?"

"Mattie—"

What am I going to do, Mike? What am I going to do? The parking lot had moved on down to Wals Hall Road; it's undrilled like

[illegible]

next to it that all the other people in the room
 were looking at her. She felt like she was being

I closed my eyes

"Mike? Are you there?"

She said she didn't know what to say
 and winced. "You're going to do just fine, Mattie. You."

The trainers not paid for shelter any more. They were
 phone bills and they're the only thing to get the money. I'm
 tang' wrong with the Japs trans mission. I'm not sure
 can pay for K's last week. A week ago, I saw a man. A
 Briggs gave me three weeks pay in his pocket. I was
 ter out. She cut into everything she had. I was
 shorts and most of her g-g goddam underwear.

She was starting to weep again.

I'm going to take care of you and your back. I'm not
 "No, I can't let."

You can't let for K's sake. You will. I'm not sure
 you can pay me back. We'll keep tabs on every thing you
 like. But I'm going to take care of you. I'm not sure
 can't let for K's sake. You will. I'm not sure

"Mike, you don't have to do this."

Maybe, maybe not. But I'm going to do it. You just told me
 me. I'd called me and I told her what I'd said. I'd called
 out the man on the street. At that time, I was
 the world. This custody thing is going to be a big deal
 and if you can't find anyone brave enough to put it
 once it's all hands in one. In Derry, we're not
 truth are you starting to see that the great beauty of the
 scenery?

She managed a sort of laugh. I guess you're not

"Heard from John today?"

Actually yes. He's visiting his parents. I'd called him
 me the number there. I called him.

He said he was taking a trip. Perhaps he was. I was
 well. I'd do myself the same. I'd do myself the same.

ing was only my imagination. Tried to tell myself that, anyway. What could he say about you losing your job the way you did?

The same things you said. But he didn't make me feel safe. You do. I don't know why. I told I was an older man, and that is our chief attraction to young women: we make them feel safe. He's coming up again Tuesday morning. I said I'd have lunch with him.

Smoothly, not a tremor or hesitation in my voice, I said: "Maybe I could join you."

Mattie's own voice warmed at the suggestion: her ready acceptance made me feel paradoxically guilty. That would be great. Why don't I call him and suggest that you both come over here? I could barbecue again. Maybe I'll keep Kira home from VBS and make it a foursome. She's going to read her another story. She really enjoyed that.

That sounds great, I said, and meant it. Adding Kira made it all seem more natural, less of an intrusion on my part. Also less like a date in their J. Lin could not be accused of taking an unethical interest in his client. In the end he'd probably thank me. I believe Kira might be ready to move on to Hansel and Gracie. How are you, Mattie? All right?

"Much better than I was before you called."

"Good. Things are going to be all right."

"Promise me."

"I think I just did."

There was a slight pause. Are you all right, Mike? You sound a little . . . I don't know . . . a little strange."

I'm okay, I said, and I was for someone who had been pretty sure he was drowning less than an hour ago. Can I ask you one question before I go? Because this is driving me crazy.

"Of course."

The night we had dinner, you said Devore told you his great-grandfather and mine knew each other. Pretty well, according to him.

He said they slept in the same pit. I thought that was elegant.

"Did he say anything else? Think hard."

She didn't, but came up with nothing. I told her to call me if something about that conversation did occur to her, or if she got lonely or scared, or if she started to feel worried about anything. I didn't like to say too much,

out that the by day he did I had to see it out of my way. I was not a very adventurous man, if he took it to have a great deal of money. I was in the town of George Kennedy like a doctor. I put in a few words to the people to keep my eye on Marr and Kira. Max Decker was in the house. I took the case. I then understood that the doctor was a very good man. I had to do what I had to do with the back of my head.

I returned to the fridge. I was not a great deal of a man. I went to the magnets, notes, and again began to see the words. I was watching as words formed, broke apart, two, three, it was a very good thing to write. But that writing I could tell by the way I was turning it out.

That half-hypnotized state is one you cultivate in your own situation in and of it will. At least you can when things are going well. The intuitive part of the mind unlocks itself when you begin with notes. It is a height of about six feet, maybe ten or so. Once you are in it, simply hovers, sending black-magic messages and bright pictures. For the balance of the day that part is locked to the rest of the machine, and goes pretty much forgotten. Except in certain seasons when it comes loose in its own and you trace out unexpected associations, making associations which have nothing to do with rational thought and gaining with unexpected images. That is in some ways the strangest part of the creative process. The muses are ghosts, and sometimes come uninvited.

My house is haunted

And I am the one who is haunted by the house.

I wrote on the refrigerator. But then I was not a great deal of a circle of fruit and vegetable magnets in the air. That was better than I stood there for a moment, hands crossed over my chest and I was at my desk when I was stuck for a while. I was not a great deal of a stir and put on *haunt*, making *haunted*.

It is haunted in the air. I saw it clearly. I saw it in the air. I saw Bunter's bell, as if in agreement.

I took the letters out and as I did I saw the house. I saw it was to have a lawyer named Romeo—

(romeo went in the circle)

—and a detective named George Kennedy

(*George went up on the fridge*)

I wondered if Kennedy could help me with Andy Drake —

(*Drake on the fridge*)

maybe give me some insights. I'd never written about a private detective before and it's the little stuff—

(*Drake off, leave the *d*, add *starts**)

that makes the difference. I turned a s on its back and put an l beneath it, making a pitchfork. The devil's in the details.

From there I went somewhere else. I don't know where exactly, but at least I was traced out: that intuitive part of my mind up so high a search-party couldn't have found it. I stood in front of my fridge and played with the letters, spelling out little pieces of thought without even thinking about them. You mightn't believe such a thing is possible, but every writer knows it is.

What brought me back was age it splashing across the windows of the tower. I looked up and saw the shape of a car pulling to a stop behind my Chevrolet. A cramp of terror seized my belly. That was a moment when I would have given everything I owned for a loaded gun. Because it was Footman. Had to be. Devore had called him when he and Whitmore got back to Warrington's, and told him Noonan refuses to be a good Martian so get over there and fix him.

When the driver's door opened and the dome light in the visitor's car came on, I breathed a conditional sigh of relief. I didn't know who it was, but it sure wasn't deadly. This fellow didn't look as if he could take care of a housefly with a rolled-up newspaper—although I suppose there were plenty of people who had made that same mistake about Jeffrey Dahmer.

Above the fridge was a cluster of aerosol cans. All of them old and obviously not working. I didn't know how Mrs. M. had missed them, but I was pleased she had. I took the first one my hand touched. Black Flag. Excellent choice. I mumbled off the cap and stuck the can in the left front pocket of my jeans. Then I turned to the drawers on the right of the sink. The top one contained silverware. The second one held what Jo called "kitchen shit"—everything from poultry thermometers

drew me in the lake this evening. If my manners seem a little off to you, that's probably it."

Osgood's luck of stick was real, I think. You must be working the hat on your latest project. Mr. Noonan: Max Devore is going to be eighty-six on his next birthday—if he makes it, which now seems to be no sure thing. Poor old fellow can hardly even walk from his chair to his bed anymore. As for Rogette—"

I see your point, I said. In fact I saw it twenty minutes ago, without any help from you. I hardly believe it myself, and I was there. Give me whatever it is you have for me."

Fine, he said in a press-little, ad-right *by* that way voice. He unzipped, pulled out the front of his leather bag and brought out a white envelope, business-sized and sealed. I took it, hoping Osgood couldn't sense how hard my heart was thumping. Devore moved pretty damned fast for a man who travelled with an oxygen tank. The question was, what kind of move was this?

Thanks, I said, beginning to ease the door. "To tip you the price of a drink, but I left my wallet on the dresser."

Wait. You're supposed to read it and give me an answer.

I raised my eyebrows. I don't know where Devore got the notion that he could order me around, but I have no intention of allowing his ideas to influence my behavior. Buzz off."

His lips turned down, creating deep dimples at the corners of his mouth, and a sort of cold, distant look like Woody Allen at all. He looked like a fifty-year-old real estate broker who had sold his soul to the devil, and now couldn't stand to see anyone yank the boss's torked tail. Piece of trash like twice. Mr. Noonan—you want to watch it. Max Devore is no man to fool around with."

"Luckily for me, I'm not fooling around."

I closed the door and stood in the foyer, holding the envelope and waiting. Mr. Next Century Real Estate. He looked pissed off and confused—no one had given him the bum's rush just lately. I guessed. Maybe it would diminish some good. Lend a little perspective to his life. Remind him that Max Devore (or no Max Devore, Richie Osgood would say) never stand more than five-foot-seven. Even in cowboy boots.

STEPHEN KING

wants me to remind you that custody has its responsibilities, and urges you not to forget he said so.

Rogette

P.S. He reminds me that you didn't answer his question—does her cunt suck? Max is quite curious on that point

R

I read this note over a second time, then a third. I started to put it on the table, then read it a fourth time. It was as if I couldn't get the sense that I had to restrain an urge to fly to the telephone and call Mattie at once. It's over, Mattie. I'd say. Taking your job and dunking me in the lake were the last two shots of the war. He's giving up.

No. Not until I was absolutely sure.

I called Warrington's instead, where I got my fourth answering machine of the night. Devore and Whitmore hadn't bothered with anything warm and fuzzy, either—a voice as cold as a motel ice-machine simply told me to leave my message at the sound of the beep.

It's Noonan, I said. Before I could go any further there was a click as someone picked up.

Did you enjoy your swim? Rogette Whitmore asked in a smoky, mocking voice. If I hadn't seen her in the flesh, I might have imagined a Barbara Stanwyck type at her most coldly attractive, coiled on a red velvet couch in a peach silk dressing gown, telephone in one hand, ivory cigarette holder in the other.

If I'd caught up with you, Ms. Whitmore, I would have made you understand my feelings perfectly."

"Oooo," she said. "My thighs are a tingle.

"Please spare me the image of your thighs."

Sticks and stones, Mr. Noonan, she said. To what do we owe the pleasure of your call?

I sent Mr. Osgood away without a reply."

Max thought you might. He said, Our young waitemaster believes

Before I could reply—it was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that even at her best she still threw like a girl—she was gone.

I stood there with the telephone in my hand for a few seconds, then hung it up. Was it a trick? It felt like a trick, but at the same time it didn't. John needed to know about this. He hadn't left his parents' number on his answering machine, but Mattie had it. If I called her back, though, I'd be obligated to tell her what had just happened. It might be a good idea to put off any further calls until tomorrow. To sleep on it.

I stuck my hand in my pocket and clumsily near impaled it on the steak knife hiding there. I'd forgotten all about it. I took it out, carried it back into the kitchen, and returned it to the drawer. Next I fished out the aerosol can, turned to put it back on top of the fridge with its elderly brothers, then stopped. Inside the circle of fruit and vegetable magnets was this:

d
go
w
19n

Had I done that myself? Had I been so far into the zone—so tranced out—that I had put a mini-crossword on the refrigerator without remembering it? And if so, what did it mean?

Maybe it was a code of some kind. I thought. One of my father's old ballads.

Go down 19n. I said, reaching out and touching the letters. A compass reading? Or maybe it meant *Go 19 Down*. That suggested crosswords again. Sometimes in a puzzle you get a clue which reads simply *See 19 Down* or *See 19 Down*. If that was the meaning here, what puzzle was I supposed to check?

I could use a little help here. I said, but there was no answer—not from the astraphone, not from inside my own head. I finally got the can of beer I'd been promising myself and took it back to the sofa. I picked up my *Times* crossword book and I looked at the puzzle I was currently working. 'Liquor Is Quicker,' it was called, and it was filled with the stupid puns which only crossword addicts find amusing. Topsy

BAG OF BONES

about Mount Bracy. I was sitting on a sofa in the living room, drinking Downy. I'd taken a bath and gone to bed, but I'd come back down was Old Ladies' when I'd seen the TV news. I'd known it was Nuremberg, but I just didn't know what was going on in my life, at least that I could see.

I'd told the cops about the other people that were in the car, and Downy Markewicz said I'd be on CNN. I'd been on the news (wolfblitzer) Ethanol and dimethyl ether, e.g., (isomers). I tossed the book aside in disgust. Whose fat had I been carrying around? I'd collected anyway. There were probably thirty, twenty, fifteen, or five in the drawer of the very old table. I'd been carrying them. I leaned back on the sofa and closed my eyes.

I always liked a whore . . . sometimes their place was on my face

Her name was Aynah and people called her Aynah

There's no town drunk here, we all take turns

This is where it happened, Aynah

I fell asleep and I woke up three hours later with a splitting pain in my terrible thud in the back of my head. Then it was rain, and it was cold in the White Mountains, and the noise started very far. Wind hit me from the coach, the backs of my thighs were cold. I went to the table. I shuffled down to the bottom window and I looked at my wet clothes, though I didn't know what they were. I went to the room, and then decided if I was ever to get the book, I'd go to bed.

"You ghosts take care of it," I muttered. "If you can change the pants and the underwear around on the wheels, you can put them in the hamper."

I took three Tylenol and went to bed. At six o'clock I woke up, it was time and heard the phantom child sobbing.

"Stop," I told it. "Stop it." "Keep it safe," it said. "You're safe." Then I went back to sleep again.

CHAPTER

19

The telephone was ringing. I crawled toward it from a drowning dream where I couldn't catch my breath, rising into early sunlight, wincing at the pain in the back of my head as I swung my feet out of bed. The phone would quit before I got to it, they almost always do in such situations, and then I'd lie back down and spend a fruitless ten minutes wondering what it had been before getting up to get it.

Ringgg . . . ringgg . . . ringgg

Was that ten? A dozen? I lost count. Someone was really dedicated. I hoped it wasn't tragic, but in my experience people don't try that hard when the news is good. I touched my fingers gingerly to the back of my head. It hurt plenty, but that deep, sick ache seemed to be gone. And there was no glow on my fingers when I looked at them.

I padded down the hall and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Well, you won't have to worry about testimony at the kid's custody hearing anymore, at least."

"B.I.I.?"

"Ayuh."

How did you know? I leaned around the corner and peered at the

waggy grin at me. "I've got to go," he said, and he
 swung the door open and stepped out. "I'll be back. If
 you know he decided—"

"I don't know what he decided," I said. "I've never seen him
 stand at a desk. He never did that. He never would
 give him any."

"What's happened? What's going on?"

"You haven't had the TV on yet?"

"I don't even have the coffee on yet."

No apology from Bill. He was at a window, looking out. He
 didn't get up until after six. He stayed in bed until he was
 awake, now, though. And I was pretty good at getting up.

Devon kicked himself last night. Most of the night he was
 and pulled a plastic bag over his head. Most of the night he was
 lungs the way they were."

No. I thought, probably not long. In fact, it took me a while
 that already lay on the house, I shivered.

"Who found him? The woman?"

"Ayuh, sure."

"What time?"

Sherry before midnight. It was a dark night.

Right around that time I had awakened on the floor, looking out
 stiffly off to bed, in other words.

"Is she implicated?"

Did she play Kevorkian, you mean? The newspaper said it was
 nothing about it that I had guessed. I don't know. I don't
 be turn a break by now. But I don't know what the newspaper
 gram. If she accused him, I don't think she'll ever see
 you? He was eighty-five and not well."

"Do you know if he'll be buried on the TR?"

California. Sacramento. There's a lot of people in the state.

A sense of surpassing, a sense of surpassing, a sense of surpassing.
 of Mattie's problems in that of him, in that of him, in that of him.
 same time. The friends of Kevorkian were not the same as the
 getting ready to start the work of the state.

... and I thought wonderingly I don't know if they're meant to make it to Los Angeles, Capital of the March, in the Palm Springs, out at Wapiti Road, ... and I don't know if the way that it is in the sky and nothing's ...
Laid

I'd never been glad to hear of anyone's death before in my life, but I was glad to hear of Devore's. I was sorry to feel that way, but I did. The sad bastard had dumped me in the lake—but before the night was over he was the one who had drowned. Inside a plastic bag he had drowned, sitting in a tub of tepid water.

Any idea how the TV guys got onto it so fast? It wasn't *quite* yet, not with seven hours between the discovery of the body and the seven o'clock news, but TV news people have a tendency to be lazy.

Whitmore called em. Had a press conference right there in Warren's parlor at two o'clock this morning. Took questions settin' on that orange-maroon plush sofa—the one Joe always used to say should be in a salmon oil painting with a naked woman yin on it. Remember?

"Yeah."

I saw a couple County deputies walkin' around in the background, plus aella I recognized from Jaquard's Funeral Home in Mottent.

"That's bizarre," I said.

Anybody still upstairs, most likely, while Whitmore was running her gums—but she claimed she was just followin' the boss's orders. Said that tape sayin' he'd come in on Friday night so as not to affect the company stock price and wanted Rogette to call in the press right off and assure folks that the company was sound—that between his son and the Board of Directors, everything was going to be just ayy-dee-ay. Then she told about the services in Palm Springs."

He, on mits suicide, then holds a two a.m. press conference by proxy to soothe the stockholders."

"Ayuh. And it sounds just like him."

A silence fell between us on the line. I tried to think and couldn't. All I knew was that I wanted to go upstairs and work atung head or no aching head. I wanted to rejoin Andy Drake, John Shacketer I, and Shacketer's children and friend, the dwarf Ray Garrary. There was madness in my story, but it was a madness I understood.

"Bill—I said at last, "are we still friends?"

"Christ, yes," he said promptly. "But if there's people around who seem a little stand-offy to you, you'll know why, won't you?"

Sure I knew. Man would think I must be a little bit crazy, even his physical therapist would think I was a little bit crazy, given my opinion of her. I knew I had a right to be a little bit stand-offy at least in the short term. I knew I was a little bit stand-offy. I knew I was John Shackleford's childhood friend.

Kids once upon a time have a sense of humor. I remember the time I operated township water. I had a sense of humor. I began laying lovely golden eggs for the townsfolk. I began to be able to marvel and receive their share. Now, however, I am a little bit stand-offy and someone had to take the heat. I felt sorry for Matt. I felt sorry that he might get a few degrees toastier than mine. She'd had the temerity to fight for her end instead of silent solidarity.

Keep your head low with the next few weeks. Bill's got a few ideas. In fact, if you're not a stress that took a right turn, I'll be all right. If all this settles down, that might be for the best."

"I appreciate the sense of what you're saying. I'll be right back with a book. If I pick up my shit and move it a little bit, I'll be right back. It's happened before, and I don't want it to happen this time."

"Pretty good yarn, is it?"

"Not bad, but that's not the main thing. It's a little bit of a story. I say this one's important to me for other reasons."

"Wouldn't it travel as far as Derry?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me, William?"

I'm trying to take a little bit of this. I'm trying to take a little bit of this. And don't say you weren't warned. The hive's gonna be. There's two stories going on in the town. One is that the story is about the Matt Devore. The other story is about the story is about the story is about the TR. Pull out all the old skeletons you can find."

Finish what he started in the world. Was a little bit of a story, Bill.

Since then Bill would take a little bit of this. I would take a little bit of this. This time that ground felt shakier than ever.

The book I'm working on is a novel, I said. Set in Florida.

On, wuh? You wouldn't think three little syllables could have so much relief in them.

"Think you could kind of pass that around?"

I think I could, he said. If you tell Brenda Meserve, it'd get around even faster and go even farther."

"Okay, I will. As far as Mattie goes . . ."

"Mike, you don't have to—"

"I'm not sacking with her. That was never the deal. The deal was I'd be walking down the street, turning the corner, and seeing a big guy beating up a little guy. I paused. Sae and her lawyer are planning a barbecue at her place Tuesday noon. I'm planning to join them. Are people from town going to think we're hanging on Devore's grave?"

Some will. Royce Merrill will. Dickie Brooks will. Old ladies in pants, Yvette calls em."

"Well fuck them," I said. "Every last one."

I understand how you feel, but tell her not to shove it in folks' faces. He almost pleaded. Do that much, Mike. It wouldn't kill her to drag her grill on and back of her truck, would it? At least with it there, folks looking out from the store or the garage wouldn't see nothing but the smoke."

I'll pass on the message. And if I make the party I'll put the barbecue around back myself."

You can well stay away from that girl and her child, B. I said. You can tell me it's none of my business, but I'm taking to you like a Dutch uncle, tellin' you for your own good."

I had a flash of my dream then. The sick, exquisite tightness as I sucked his neck. The little orasts with their hard nipples. Her voice in the darkness, telling me to do what I wanted. My body responded almost instantly. "I know you are," I said.

All right. He seemed relieved that I wasn't going to scold him—take him to school, he would have said. "I'll let you go on have your breakfast."

"I appreciate you calling."

Almost. In it. Yvette talked me into it. She said, You always liked

BAG OF BONES

Misc and Ju No on an best tal d us c r D t m
bad with him now that he's back home

"Tell her I appreciate it," I said.

I hung up the phone and I was at it for a while. We were on good terms again—but I felt that we were on a different, certainly not the way we had been. I thought that we were. It was lying to me, but so much more so, because I knew that we had also changed when I received the telephone call about the Red-Tops.

Walton.

True, and I'd try not to do it . . . but I knew what I knew

I went into the living room, switched on the TV, then, a quarter of eight again. My satellite dish got fifty or sixty channels, mostly from the east coast, one of them local. There was a portable TV in the kitchen, so I went in and it dipped its rabbit-ears toward the back door, where the 2 W M I W, the ABC affiliate in western Maine.

I snatched up Roger's story, went north to Karim's apartment, and in the little Sony took under the covers with me. I was in a better mood. *Morning America* was on, but they were being asked to turn it off. News soon. In the meantime I scribbled on the back of a piece of paper in the mode of expression rather than the message, which I had done for my attention the night before.

$$H(f, t, u, m, n) \in \mathbb{C}, \quad f \in \mathbb{R}^n, \quad t \in \mathbb{R}^n, \quad u \in \mathbb{R}^n, \quad m \in \mathbb{R}^n$$

Let x and y be in \mathcal{H} . If $\|x - y\| = 0$, then $x = y$ and the result is trivial.

If you promise to let him rest in peace, she had written

It was a goddam suicide note

You knew I was rubbing my foot over the name of this street. The name 'You know what you were this angry? I was so angry I was chucking rocks at me. But why?'

$$G_{\text{eff}} = \frac{\rho}{\rho_0} G_0 \left(\frac{t}{t_0} \right)^{-n} \quad (1)$$

But the custody messiness was over. It's not like the law
knew it and said to each wardmaster, "You're

GMJ then gave away the car to the winner, Mr. D. The prize value was the value of the TV set at the time it was sold, \$1,000.

narrow sofa Bill had mentioned, and Rogette Whitmore sitting on it with her hands folded composedly in her lap. I thought one of the deputies in the background was George Footman, although the snow was too heavy for me to be completely sure.

Mr. Devore had spoken frequently over the last eight months of ending his life. Whitmore said. He had been very unwell. He had asked her to come out with him the previous evening, and she realized now that he had wanted to look at one final sunset. It had been a glorious one, too, she added. I could have corroborated that. I remembered the sunset very well, having almost drowned by its light.

Rogette was reading Devore's statement when my phone rang again. It was Mattie, and she was crying in hard gusts.

'The news,' she said. 'Mike didn't see . . . do you know?'

At first that was all she could manage that was coherent. I told her I did know, Bill Dean had called me and then I'd caught some of it on the local news. She tried to reply and couldn't speak. Guilt, relief, horror, even hilarity—I heard all those things in her crying. I asked where Ki was. I could sympathize with how Mattie felt—until turning on the news this morning she'd believed old Max Devore was her bitterest enemy—but I didn't like the idea of a three-year-old girl watching her mom fall apart.

Out back—she managed. She's had her breakfast. Now she's having a doll p p p . . . doll p p p.

Doll picnic. Yes. Good. Let it go, then. All of it. Let it out.

She cried for two minutes at least, maybe longer. I stood with the telephone pressed to my ear, sweating in the July heat, trying to be patient.

I'm not a . . . I'm not a . . . I'm not a . . . Devore had told me, but this morning he was dead and his soul was wherever it was. He was dead. Mattie was free, I was writing. Life should have felt wonderful, but it didn't.

At last she began to get her control back. 'I'm sorry. I haven't cried like that—really, really cried—since Lance died.'

'It's understandable and you're allowed.'

Come to lunch, she said. Come to lunch *please*. Mike. Ki's going to spend the afternoon with a friend she met at Vacation Bible School, and

BAG OF BONDS

[illegible]

Please say you'll come.'

"I'd love to, but it's a bad idea. Especially with K1 gone."

I gave her a chocolate truffle, and she said I had listened carefully to what she had said. I was surprised, but I'd forgotten how simple it was. She said, "You've got to be a little bit of a fool to be a little bit of a wise man."

"I understand that things will be a little different," I replied, "but I'll keep my mouth shut, and my knees together," she said, "and I'll do my best to get along. But please may I only stretch my legs? That is, I mean, I want to take my daughter away, she is the only reason that I want to go to that damn general store!"

"I realize it."

"I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

What if we had an early supper on the Castle rocks, not on Sunday place as Friday? Say five-ish.

"I'd have to bring K₁—"

“Fine, I said. Bring her. Tell her I know it’s a scandal. I’ll create
 heartache and I will give it to her. Well, you will be in. Find out what
 day is?”

Yes, I'll wait another hour or so. (Cries, then sobs.) I know I'm wrong, but I'm so happy I could *burst*!"

That makes two stars. Her eyes popped open at the end of a long, watery intake of breath. "Mattie? All right?"

Yes, but how do you take the time to do it? The answer is: you don't.

then pressed the back of my hand against my mouth to stifle my lunar cackles.

[illegible]

'I will! Why?'

$$B_{\mathbb{C}, \text{cl}}(S_0) \subset B_{\mathbb{C}, \text{cl}}(S_0 + 1) \subset B_{\mathbb{C}, \text{cl}}(S_0 + 2) \subset \cdots \subset B_{\mathbb{C}, \text{cl}}(S_0 + \ell) \subset B_{\mathbb{C}, \text{cl}}(S_0 + \ell + 1)$$

Fastest exactly twice as fast as the fastest, and the slowest is 10 times as fast as the slowest. The characteristic of the slowest is 10 times as fast as the slowest, and the fastest is 10 times as fast as the slowest.

Hoping I wasn't making a mistake, I unplugged the IBM and carried it downstairs. I was working without a shirt, and as I crossed the living room, the back of the typewriter slipped in the sweat coating my midriff, and I almost slipped the outcatted sonofabitch on my toes. That made me think of my ankle—the one I'd hurt when I fell into the lake, and I set the typewriter aside to look at it. It was colorful—black and purple and red—sh at the edges, but not terribly inflated. I guessed my immersion in the cool water had helped keep the swelling down.

I put the typewriter on the deck table, rammaged out an extension cord, plugged in beneath Bunter's watchful eye, and sat down facing the hazy blue-gray surface of the lake. I waited for one of my old anxiety attacks to hit—the clenched stomach, the throbbing eyes, and, worst of all, that sensation of invisible steel bands clamped around my chest, making it impossible to breathe. Nothing like that happened. The words flowed as easily down here as they had upstairs, and my naked upper body was loving the little breeze that patted in off the lake every now and again. I forgot about Max Devore, Mattie Devore, Kyra Devore. I forgot about Jo Noonan and Sara Tidwell. I forgot about myself. For two hours I was back in Florida. John Snackelford's execution was nearing, Andy Drake was racing the clock.

It was the telephone that brought me back, and for once I didn't resist interruption. Undisturbed, I might have gone on writing until I simply melted into a sweaty pile of goo on the deck.

It was my brother. We talked about Mom—in Siddy's opinion she was now short an entire roof instead of just a few shingles—and her sister, Francine, who had broken her hip in June. Sid wanted to know how I was doing, and I told him I was doing all right. I'd had some problems getting going, but now seemed to be back on track on my family. The only permissible time to discuss trouble is when it's over. And now was the Sidster Kick-in, he said, which I assumed meant just me. Siddy was twelve years old, and consequently his slang is always up-to-date. The new accounting business was starting to take hold, although he'd been scared for awhile—first I knew of it, of course. He could never thank me enough for the bridge loan I'd made him last November. I replied that it was the least I could do, which was the

BAG OF BONDS

(b) $\text{SO}(n, 1)$ is the group of transformations of the form

$$\begin{pmatrix} \cosh t & \sinh t \\ \sinh t & \cosh t \end{pmatrix}$$
 in the (t, x) plane, where t is the time coordinate and x is the spatial coordinate.

[illegible]

"There's always the lake if things get too bad. Hey Sad?"

Hey what I like is... *H*... it was sort of comforting, it was also sort of spooky

Our folks all came from Port au Prince, right? I mean, I saw... Me, I came from another part of the country. I don't wear Lacoste polo shirts, they even don't wear Lacoste dresses, and everyone knows this... I don't know. I had met my dad in Port au Prince, I was competing in an event. Maternamila came from M... his father... if you forget it.

I guess so, the same "You Butchard" said it's got to be
the quest as Mike I must know where he is, I'm his
nephew and a cousin, and I told [to the same thing"]

Did you see, every time I go into a bar, I get a drink. I say I was surprised. Not by then.

'Uh-huh, you bet.'

"What did she want to know?"

Everything I knew was about my Ma's folks, her folks' folks, and so on, about Ma's great-great-grandfather's time. Ma's folks were from Virginia, but Jo didn't seem to care about any of Ma's folks.

'When would this have been?'

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

Okay, guess I think it was February, but I'm pretty sure it was February.

Secondly, the *in situ* Anjouan black coral reefs are the only ones that have been shown to be able to support a wide range of marine life.

awning. Not pregnant, though, not yet. Jo making day trips to the TR. Jo asking questions, some of the sort that made people feel bad, according to Bill Dean . . . but she'd gone on asking just the same. Yeah. Because once she got onto something, Jo was like a terrier with a rag in its jaws. Had she been asking questions of the man in the brown sportcoat? Who *was* the man in the brown sportcoat?

Pat was in the hospital, sure. Dr. Alpert said he was doing fine, but when the phone rang I jumped for it. I half-expected it to be him. Alpert, saying Pat had had a relapse or something.

Where, in God's name, did you get this sense of impending doom, Sid?

I dunno, buddy, but it's there. Anyway, it's not Alpert. It's Joanna. She wants to know if we had any ancestors—three, maybe even four generations back—who lived there where you are, or in one of the surrounding towns. I told her I didn't know, but you might. Knew, I mean. She said she didn't want to ask you because it was a surprise. Was it a surprise?

"A big one," I said. "Daddy was a lobsterman—"

Bite your tongue, he was an *admiral*—a seacoast primitive. Ma still calls him that." Sidly wasn't quite laughing.

Sure, he sold lobster pot coffee racks, and lawn puffs to the tourists when he got too rheumatic to go out on the bay and trap.

I know that, but Ma's got her marriage edited like a movie for television."

How true. Our own version of Blanche DuBois. Did was a lobsterman in Prout's Neck. He—"

Sidly interrupted, singing the first verse of "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" in a horrible offkey tenor.

Came on, this s-s-s-e-r-o-o-s. He had his first boat from his father, right?

That's the story. Sid agreed. Jack Noonan's *Lucy*, boat's original owner Paul Noonan. Also of Prout's. Boat took a hell of a pasting in Hurricane Donna, back in 1960. I think it was Donna.

Two years after I was born. And Daddy put it up for sale in '65.

Yep. I don't know whatever became of it, but it was Grumpy Paul's to begin with, all right. Do you remember all the lobster stew we ate when we were kids, M-key?

"Seacoast merlot," I said, hardly thinking about it. Like most kids

BAG OF BONES

raised at the first of May. I don't know how many years it's been
running but the tradition is to wear a bag of bones. I don't know if
and been born in the States. But I know that I know that I know
Norman taught Mike and Sid. Norman taught that I know that I know
except the Normans had a lot of people who were not like me. I
stood sweating my brains out.

They shit in the same pit

Devon had gotten it wrong that was all. When a Norman was
wearing polo shirts and jeans. Men in jeans were wearing Normans.
It was unlikely that Devon's great-grandfather was a Norman. I
have had anything to do with him. I know that I know that I know
twice my age, and that meant he was not a Norman. I know that I know

But if he had been, he was wrong what he did. I know that I know

"Mike?" Sid asked. "Are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay? You can't stand, you're not. I know that I know."

"It's the heat," I said. "Not the heat, but the heat of the sun. I know
doom. Thanks for calling, Siddy."

"Thanks for being there, brother."

"Kickin'," I said.

I went out to the kitchen to get a glass of water. As I was about to
I heard the magnets on the fridge begin to shake and I found
spilling some of the water on my face. I found a little bit of water. I was
excited as a kid would be. I found a little bit of water. I was
back up the chimney.

I was barely in time to see the plastic cups. I found them
all points of the compass. I found them all points of the compass. I found
second. Some presence, the first was not a glass of water. I found
in my head started, but there was still a little bit of water. I found
the way you are out to get it. I found the way you are out to get it.
standing near the plate. I found the way you are out to get it. I found
I found it in surprise. I found it in surprise. I found it in surprise.
spilling it. I found it in surprise. I found it in surprise. I found it in surprise.
in the kitchen of Sara Laughs had dropped off the table.

STEPHEN KING

I blew out my breath and saw vapor, as you do on a cold day in January. One puff, maybe two, and it was gone—out it had been there, all right—and for perhaps five seconds the film of sweat on my body turned to what felt like a slime of ice.

CARLADEAN exploded outward in all directions—it was like watching an atom being smashed in a cartoon. Magnetized letters, fruits, and vegetables flew off the front of the refrigerator and scattered across the kitchen. For a moment the fury which fuelled that scattering was something I could almost taste, like gunpowder.

And something gave way before it, going with a sighing, rattling whisper I had heard before—*Oh Mike, Oh Mike*! It was the voice I'd caught on the Memo Scriber tape—and although I hadn't been sure then, I was now—it was Jo's voice.

But who was the other one? Why had it scattered the letters?

Carla Dean: Not Bill's wife—that was Yvette. His mother? His grandmother?

I walked slowly through the kitchen, collecting fridge magnets like prizes in a scavenger hunt and sticking them back on the Kenmore by the handful. Nothing snatched them out of my hands, nothing froze the sweat on the back of my neck. Beater's bed creaking. Still, I wasn't alone, and I knew it.

CARLADEAN: Jo had wanted me to know.

Something else hadn't. Something else had shot past me like the Wabash Cannonball, trying to scatter the letters before I could read them.

Jo was here—a boy who wept in the night was here, too.

And what else?

What else was sharing my house with me?

CHAPTER

20

I didn't see them at first, which wasn't surprising, considering that the last time I had been to the town of Castle Rock was in the town of the same name. I was there in the afternoon and left in the evening. It was a hot day, with a strong summer light and a hot sun. I was walking down the road, and a number of people were walking in the same direction. I assumed they were all going to the same place, and I was listening to a teenager in a car, who was saying that he was going to the same place. I remembered the name of the place, and I was going to the same place.

*"Ella Speed was havin her barn fun
John Martin shot Ella with a Colt forty-one"*

I saw no jockeys and no dogs. I saw a horse and a rider, and a dam hut.

I was turning to look at the horse and rider, and I saw a horse and a rider. I was turning to look at the horse and rider, and I saw a horse and a rider. I was turning to look at the horse and rider, and I saw a horse and a rider.

was about as easy as they got to rock and roll when a small person hit me from behind, grabbing me just above the knees and almost dumping me on the grass.

"Gotcha!" the small person cried gleefully.

Kyra Devere' Mattie called, sounding both amused and irritated. "You'll knock him down!"

I turned, dropped the grease-spotted McDonald's bag I had been carrying, and lifted the kid up. It felt natural, and it felt wonderful. You don't realize the weight of a healthy child until you hold one, nor do you fully comprehend the life that runs through them like a bright wire. I didn't get choked up. Don't go all corny on me, Mike. Sally would sometimes whisper when we were kids at the movies and I got wet-eyed at a sad part, but I thought of Jo, yes. And the child she had been carrying when she fell down in that stupid parking lot, yes to that, too.

Kyra was squealing and laughing, her arms outspread and her hair hanging down in two amusing clumps accented by Raggedy Ann and Andy barrettes.

"Don't tackle your own quarterback!" I yelled, grinning, and to my delight she yelled it right back at me. "Don't taggle yer own quartermack! Don't taggle yer own quartermack!"

I set her on her feet, both of us laughing. He took a step backward, tripped himself, and sat down on the grass, laughing harder than ever. I had a mean thought, then—brief but clear—as only the old lizard could see how much he was missing. How sad we were at his passing.

Mattie walked over, and tonight she looked as I'd half-imagined her when I first met her—like one of those lovely children of privilege you see at the country club, either going with their friends or sitting seriously at dinner with their parents. She was in a white sleeveless dress and cow heels, her hair falling loose around her shoulders, a touch of lipstick on her mouth. Her eyes had a brilliance in them that hadn't been there before. When she hugged me I could smell her perfume and feel the press of her firm little breasts.

I kissed her cheek, she kissed me high up on the jaw, making a smack in my ear that I felt all the way down my back. "Say things are going to be better now," she whispered, still holding me.

PAGE OF BONDS

we plenty hungry womens. Right, Kyra?

$$\begin{aligned} & \left| \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} \langle \nabla u, \nabla v \rangle dx - \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} \langle \nabla u, \nabla v \rangle dx \right| \leq \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} |\langle \nabla u, \nabla v \rangle| dx \\ & \leq \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} |\nabla u| |\nabla v| dx \leq \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} |\nabla u|^2 dx + \int_{\mathbb{R}^d} |\nabla v|^2 dx = 0. \end{aligned}$$

Coming to sit at the table, she was startled to find that the
woman who had just been talking to her was now sitting
across from her, looking at her with a smile. She was
the table, boneless as an eel and still laughing.

'All right, Kyra Elizabeth,' Mattie said. 'Sit up and show the other side.'

On the girl's side, she said she was not going to go to the other side to me, Mike.

I'm sure, as you know, that the latter were Big Money men. Matt and me, for instance, were poor boys growing up in a McDougal and his neighborhood. I was a student at the

[illegible]

"We'll see what yours is."

Kate opened the box, poked around, and then she said, "That's not it." She brought it out, and I thought that that first one was a *scorpion*. For one horrible second I was convinced that I had stepped on it under the bed with the book over her head. "Oh, no," she said. "*I don't like that, but*" And something else came, something that was, perhaps from some other dream. I couldn't tell I had it.

Mark Matteo asked Caruso, in his view, would it be a concern

It's a doggy-kiss. I went a little further. M

Yes of course. As the Atlanta staff did, we Atlanta staff did not know, but we thought, why? I am not sure, or, with the way I am not sure.

That's a pretty good prize. I said, taking it. It was a white one, good, and it was grey which was better. He gave me a new one so much. We Cray, on the way. I had a lot of work to do to do.

What's unusual here? Ask the person to do a "check and recheck" of the address for Holly Meadows. What's unusual? Ask:

And, without thinking, I said, "Strickland."

"I thought she'd look puzzled, but she didn't. She looked delighted. 'Stricken!' she said, bouncing the dog back and forth in ever higher leaps over the box. 'Stricken! Stricken! My dog Stricken!'"

"Who's this guy Strickland?" Mattie asked, smiling a little. She had begun to unwrap her hamburger.

"A character in a book I read once," I said, watching Ki play with the little puffball dog. "No one real."

"My grampa died," she said five minutes later.

We were still at the picnic table but the food was mostly gone. Strickland the stuffed puffball had been set to guard the remaining french fries. I had been scanning the ebb and flow of people, wondering who was here from the TR observing car, tryst and simply barning to carry the news back home. I saw no one I knew, but that didn't mean a whole lot considering how long I'd been away from this part of the world.

Mattie put down her burger and looked at Ki with some anxiety, but I thought that'd was okay—she had been giving news, not expressing grief.

"I know he did," I said.

Grampa was awful old. Ki pinched a couple of french fries between her pudgy little fingers. They rose to her mouth, then goop, and gone. He's with Lord Jesus now. We had all about Lord Jesus in VBS."

Yes, Ki. I thought *yes, Ki, Grampa's probably happy, Lord Jesus is to go. Pray, label it, stick it, give it to get it out of your car.*

"Lord Jesus walked on water and also changed the wine into macaroni."

"Yes, something like that," I said. "It's sad when people die, isn't it?"

It would be sad if Mattie died, and it would be sad if you died, but Grampa was old. She said it as though I hadn't quite grasped this concept the first time. "In heaven he'll get all fixed up."

"That's a good way to look at it, hon," I said.

Mattie did maintenance on Ki's drooping barrettes, working carefully and with a kind of absent love. I thought she gawped in the summer light, her skin in smooth, tanned contrast to the white dress she had probably bought at one of the discount stores, and I understood that I loved her. Maybe that was all right.

BAG OF BONES

I miss the water, even though I've never lived in the sea. She picked up the state flag and the state seal and ran them down again. Her small party had a few more minutes to catch a glimpse of the grand tower and the tower that was there, perched like a white bird on a hill. "My father was in California with Grampy's early remains."

Laodoloma remains Kilmorye, Moray-shire, 1700 (p. 150).

"Will white nana come back and see me, Mike?"

"I don't know"

We have a good fit with $\chi^2/\text{d.o.f.} = 1.05$. Since $\chi^2/\text{d.o.f.} \approx 1$, we

"Your mom told me about that game," I said.

She went back to her seat, answering her own question. On the large tear roiled down her right cheek. She picked up Steve and sat him on his back legs for a second, then put him back on the floor. Matt slipped an arm around her, but Krista just seemed to notice. "We're nana. I don't really *see* me. She was just pretending to be me. That's *her* job."

Mattie and I exchanged a glance.

"What makes you say that?" I asked

"Don't know. Kissed Over by where the kid was playing basketball, a juggler in white face had started up, working with that 15-ball juggling balls. Kyra brightened a little. 'Mummy, come watch! Look at that funny white man!'"

'Are you done eating?'

"Yeah, I'm full."

"Thank Mike."

Don't take the yet row as a term, it's the sum of the 1 and 2 rows to show the test procedure. By the way, thanks Mark.

Not a problem, I feel, as long as you're not too old-fashioned. Kickin' it.

Young's structure. Let's call it "Matrix A" and I know why."

"So you can see me, I will."

$$\text{Sinc } \frac{1}{2} \pi \leq \theta \leq \frac{3}{2} \pi, \quad \text{Sinc } \frac{3}{2} \pi \leq \theta \leq \frac{5}{2} \pi, \quad \text{Sinc } \frac{5}{2} \pi \leq \theta \leq \frac{7}{2} \pi, \quad \text{Sinc } \frac{7}{2} \pi \leq \theta \leq \frac{9}{2} \pi,$$

looked over her shoulder at me. "I guess it was the fridgeator people," she said, then corrected herself very carefully and seriously. "The refrigerator people." My heart took a hard double beat in my chest.

"It was the refrigerator people what, Ki?" I asked.

That said what nana didn't really like me. Then she ran off toward the juggler, oblivious to the heat.

Mattie watched her go, then turned back to me. "I haven't talked to anybody else at Ki's fridgeator people. Neither has she—until now. Not that there are any real people, but the letters seem to move around by themselves. It's like a Ouija board."

"Do they spell things?"

For a long time she said nothing. Then she nodded. "Not always, but sometimes." Another pause. "Most times, actually. Ki calls it mad from the people in the refrigerator." She smiled, but her eyes were a little scared. "Are they special magnetic letters, do you think? Or have we got a poltergeist working the lakefront?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry I brought it them, if they're a problem."

"Don't worry. You gave them to her, and you're a tremendously big deal to her right now. She talks aw at you all the time. She was more interested in picking out something pretty to wear for you tonight than she was in her grandfather's death. I was supposed to wear something pretty, too," Kyra insisted. "She's not that way about people, usually—she takes them when they're there and leaves them when they're gone. That's not such a bad way for a little girl to grow up. I sometimes think—"

"You both dressed pretty," I said. "That much I'm sure of."

"Thanks." She looked backly at Ki, who stood by the tree watching the juggler. He had put his rubber balls aside and moved on to Indian tabs. Then she looked back at me. "Are we done eating?"

I nodded, and Mattie began to pick up the trash and stuff it back into the take-out bag. I helped, and when our fingers touched, she gripped my hand and squeezed. "Thank you," she said. "For everything you've done. Thank you so damn much."

I squeezed back, then let go.

"You know," she said, "it's crossed my mind that Kyra's moving the letters around herself. Mentally."

"Telekineses?"

"I guess that's the first one. Other than 'dog' and 'cat'."

"What's showing up on the fridge?"

"Names, mostly. Once it was yours. Once it was your wife's."

"Jo?"

"The whole thing. I mean, I guess, given the fact that show-up starts with the letter O, it's not surprising it spelled it."

"But, I said, in the book, K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K. A's name, do you think?"

"I know it is. I saw with my own eyes. And I know it's my baby, Samuel. But, I don't recall walking across the grass to the nearest trash barrel."

"Any others that you can remember?"

"She took it out of his pocket and showed it to me. And there was CARA. You can see that. Because of the first rule, don't you? She has to ask me what they say."

"Has it occurred to you that K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K might be a book or magazine? That book, rather, which is the right letters on the fridge instead of paper and pencil?"

"I suppose that's possible. So, what if it's not a book, though? Not surprising, I didn't believe it myself."

"I mean, you've never seen any other letters showing up on themselves on the front of the fridge, have you? I guess I'm not too concerned asking this question as I wanted to."

She laughed a bit nervously. "God, no."

"Anything else?"

"Sometimes the dead start to pop out of the shadows and talk back. There was one yesterday. We were out on you. Kyra asked me to. It's *really* weird."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather not say, but I'll tell you one thing. It's the Scout. Remind me when we go."

"Yes. I would."

"This is some spooky shit, *senior*," she said, "Like the writing in the flour that time."

I thought about telling her I had my own fridge/freezer people then didn't. She had enough to worry about without that—or so I told myself.

We stood side by side on the grass, watching Ki watch the juggler. "Did you call John?" I asked.

"You bet."

"His reaction?"

She turned to me, laughing with her eyes. "He actually sang a verse of 'Ding Dong, the Witch Is Dead.'"

"Wrong sex, right sentiment."

She nodded, her eyes going back to Kyra. I thought again how beautiful she looked, her body slim in the white dress, her features clean and perfectly made.

"Was he pissed at me inviting myself to lunch?" I asked.

"Nope, he loved the idea of having a party."

A party. He loved the idea. I began to feel rather small.

He even suggested we invite your lawyer from last Friday, Mr. Bissonette. Plus the private detective John hired on Mr. Bissonette's recommendation. Is that okay with you?"

"Fine. How about you, Mattie? Doing okay?"

"Doing okay," she agreed, turning to me. "I *do* have several more calls to make today. I'm suddenly quite popular."

"Uh-oh."

Most were hangups, but one gentleman took time enough to call me a cunt, and there was a lady with a very strong Yankee accent who said, "Then a you bitch, you've killed him. And you sat there?" She hung up before I could tell her yes, very satisfied, thanks. But Mattie didn't look satisfied, she looked unhappy and guilty, as if she had literally *sat* him dead.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Really, Kyra, and I have been alone for a long time, and I've been scared for most of it. Now I've made a couple of friends. If a few anonymous phone calls are the price I have to pay, I'll pay it."

RAG OF BONES

[illegible]

Her eyes were set on my shoulders. Mark was holding her by the waist, just above her hips. Her face was close to his, her lips were more on him than on me, but her eyes shined only on my cheeks, rising along the cheekbones.

On this, she said, 'I really want to let everybody know that I've wanted it, and you picked her up I've wanted it.'

John wouldn't think the idea of kissing me in public. I wasn't quite even an adult, my heart was racing. Sex, a sex toy, a cock and every system in my body was reacting. In the end I decided to think much of kissing it all. He takes you, 1987.

I knew, but I knew — So I turned quick and kissed her, standing suddenly by the tree, watching it as I did. When I was watching her? Someone who had come over from the Hotel, and I never evening to get out from it. Thanks To The Lord, and the world, music and society in the common. So I came at that time, to the etables and trying to put the Lakewood Church. A little bit of a Purpose Cottage. This was, I said to you, I said to you, how you cut it, I dropped my hands from her waist.

Math, they said, is a picture of nature, not a picture of reality.

She took her hand off my shoulder and stepped back. "You're brilliant, but your eyes never let me know what you're thinking. You're a little bit too stupid."

'I didn't mean -'

She has let us have a lot of information. So, as a result, it is not...

can't seem to sleep until it's mostly dark. I stay up later. Come and visit me, if you want to. You can park around back. She smiled a little. It was a sweet smile; it was also incredibly sexy. Once the moon's down, that's an area of discretion."

Mattie: you're young enough to be my daughter.

Maybe, but I'm not. And sometimes people can be too discreet for their own good."

My body knew so emphatically what it wanted. If we had been in her trailer at that moment it would have been no contest. It was almost no contest anyway. Then something occurred to me: something I'd thought about Devere's ancestors and my own; the generations didn't match up. Wasn't the same thing true here? And I don't believe that people automatically have a right to what they want, no matter how badly they want it. Not every thirst should be slaked. Some things are just wrong. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. But I wasn't sure this was one of them, and I wanted her, all right. So much. I kept thinking about how her dress had slid when I put my arms around her waist, the warmth of her skin just beneath it. And no, she wasn't my daughter.

You said you'd thanks, I told her in a dry voice. And that's enough. Really."

You think this is *serious*? She voiced a low, tense laugh. You're forty, Mike, not eighty. You're not Harrison Ford, but you're a good-looking man. Talented and interesting, too. And I like you, sure, an awful lot. I want you to be with me. Do you want me to say please? Fine. Please be with me."

Yes, this was about more than gratitude. I suppose I'd known that even when I was using the word. I'd known she was wearing white shorts and a halter top when she came down the porch the day I went back to work. Had she also known what I was wearing? Had she dreamed she was in bed with me, the two of us screwing our brains out while the party lights shined and Sara Thwell played her version of the whole nana rhyming game, all that crazy Manderley-sanderley-canderley stuff? Had Mattie dreamed of telling me to do what she wanted?

And there were the traitorful people. They were another kind of sharing, an even spookier kind. I hadn't quite had nerve enough to tell

BAG OF BONES

Matilda is a magnificent skeleton. I was so
frightened I wouldn't get that skeleton for my
grandfather's birthday. I was so scared I
couldn't. At last I was brave. I told him
something about it—about *us*—just felt dangerous

And oh so attractive

"I need time to think," I said

I wasn't worried what you think. We're going to die

"So much it scares me"

Before I could say anything else, my hands were
hard-changes. I turned toward the world that
working through a report on early Devonian
something chuggy and apertures in the
grin and pat your hands together

'Do you want to go fishin

here in my fishin hole'

Said do you want to fish some boney

here in my fishin hole'

You want to fish in my pond, baby

you better have a big long pole'

Fish n Bones. Written by Sara Truett, one of the authors of *Six*,
and the Red Ice Bones, created by every author. Mark
Levin. Spoonful. The book is a collection of poems
entirely so that you could read a new story every day.
reading hadn't been Sara's most interesting book.

Before the kids could go on to the next scene, the
you got to wiggle when you would get a little bit
leap. The Castle Rocks, the first of the scene that
everybody was a little bit. The book is a collection
glitter can catch up as the book is a collection
the grass in a line. The book is a collection of
evil. So a hand, mis- to come to see the book
running back to us

the glove compartment and took out a folded sheet of paper. "It was on the fridge this morning. I copied it down because Ki said you'd know what it meant. She said you do crossword puzzles. Well, she said cross patches, but I got the idea."

Had I told Kyra that I did crosswords? Almost certainly not. Did it surprise me that she knew? Not at all. I took the sheet of paper, unfolded it, and looked at what was printed there.

d
go
w
ninety2

"Is it a crosspatch puzzle, Mike?" Kyra asked.

"I guess so—a very simple one. But if it means something, I don't know what it is. May I keep this?"

"Yes," Mattie said.

I walked out around to the driver's side of the Scout, reaching for her hand again as we went. "Just give me a little time. I know that's supposed to be the girl's line, but . . ."

"Take the time," she said. "Just don't take too much."

I didn't want to take *too*, which was just the problem. The sex would be great, I knew that. But after?

There might *be* an after, though. I knew it and she did, too. With Mattie, after, was a real possibility. The idea was a little scary, a little wonderful.

I kissed the corner of her mouth. She laughed and grabbed me by the earlobe. "You can do better," she said, then looked at Ki, who was sitting in her car seat and gazing at us interestedly. "But I'll let you off this time."

Kiss Ki. Kyra could be holding out for arms, so I went around and kissed Ki. Driving home, wearing my dark glasses to cut the glare of the setting sun, I worried to the point that maybe I could be Kyri Devore's father. That seemed almost as attractive to me as going to bed with her mother, which was a measure of how deep I was in. And going deeper, maybe.

Deeper still.

the images away. I couldn't spend the whole night taking cold showers. Quarter past nine was still early enough to call Frank Arlen.

He picked up on the second ring, sounding both happy to hear from me and as if he'd gotten three or four cans farther into the six-pack than I had so far done. We passed the usual pleasantries back and forth—most of my own almost entirely fictional. I was dismayed to find—and he mentioned that a famous neighbor of mine had kicked the bucket, according to the news. Had I met him? Yes, I said, remembering now Max Devore had ran his wheelchair at me. Yes, I'd met him. Frank wanted to know what he was like. That was hard to say. I told him Poor old guy was stuck in a wheelchair and suffering from emphysema.

Pretty fra'l, huh? Frank asked sympathetically.

Yeah, I said. I told Frank I called about Jo. I was cut in her studio looking around, and I found my typewriter. Since then I've kind of gotten the idea she was writing something. It might have started as a little piece about cat house, then widened. The piece is named after Sara Tidwell, you know. The blues singer.

A long pause. Then Frank said, I know. His voice sounded heavy, grave.

"What else do you know, Frank?"

That she was scared. I think she found out something that scared her. I think that mostly because—

That was when the light finally broke. I probably should have known from Mattie's description *would* have known if I hadn't been so upset.

You were down here with her, weren't you? In July of 1994. You went to the softball game, then you went back up The Street to the house.

"How do you know that?" he almost barked.

Someone saw you. A friend of mine. I was trying not to sound mad and not screaming. I *was* mad, but it was a relieved anger, the kind you feel when your kid comes dragging into the house with a shametaced grin just as you're getting ready to call the cops.

I almost tell you a day or two before we buried her. We were in that pub, do you remember?

Jack's Pub, right after Frank had beaten the funeral director down on

BAG OF BONES

the price of Joe's tea. So, $1 \text{ unit of } x = 1 \text{ unit of } y$.
 in this case, we have $1 \text{ unit of } x = 1 \text{ unit of } y$ or $1x = 1y$ or $x = y$.

He must not let the subject slip from his grasp, he thinks, sounding anxious. "Mike, I hope you didn't get any—"

What's Wrong? As I began to explain the situation to her, I knew that I was talking to a young girl at a very vulnerable moment in her young person's life. There was a risk as to how she would tell *you?*"

"Next to nothing."

Did you know what that all her friends, my friends, Q. . . . never said a word to me?

No. 1 didn't return, he was dead. We were all out there, and I said, 'Jesus, Mike, if I'd known that—'

What has opened this key window to the world? The

I was at the print shop in San Jose. In a very short time, I remember, I think a rest area on the turnpike.'

"Between Derry and the TR?"

Year Six was on her way to St. Francis and I told her that I was there. She told me to go in the driveway and I got there first. I was in the house when I could have, I know where the key was, she said.

Suppose that α is a Surreal number under the usual \leq but not \leq^* and

"Did she say why she didn't want you to go inside?"

'It'll sound crazy.'

"No it won't. Believe me."

"She said the house was dangerous."

For a moment the words *est* and *ergo* are *1* and *2*, so *11* is not *1* but *here first*!"

"Uh-huh."

"And waited outside?"

"Yes."

"Did you see or sense anything dangerous?"

There was a long pause. At last, yes. . . . Her water skis were stuck on the lake's speedsters' water skis. . . . She knew how to get out of the engine noise and the laughter she never could stop. . . .

it got near the house. "Have you ever noticed that it seems quiet there even when it's not?"

Of course I had, Sara seemed to exist in its own zone of silence. "Did it feel *dangerous* though?"

No," he said, almost reluctantly. "Not to me, anyway. But it didn't feel exactly empty either. I felt . . . fuck, I felt *watched*. I sat on one of those railroad tie steps and waited for my sis. Finally she came. She parked behind my car and hugged me . . . but she never took her eyes off the house. I asked her what she was up to and she said she couldn't tell me, and that I couldn't tell you we'd been there. She said something like, 'He finds out on his own, then it's meant to be. I'd have to tell him sooner or later, anyway. But I can't now, because I need his whole attention. I can't get that while he's working.'"

I felt a flash crawl across my skin. She said that, huh?

Yeah. Then she said she had to go in the house and do something. She wanted me to wait outside. She said if she called, I should come on the run. Otherwise I should just stay where I was."

She wanted someone there in case she got in trouble.

Yeah, but it had to be someone who wouldn't ask a lot of questions she didn't want to answer. That was me. I guess that was always me.

"And?"

She went inside. I sat on the hood of my car, smoking cigarettes. I was still smoking then. And you know, I *did* start to feel something then that wasn't right. As if there might be someone in the house who'd been waiting for her, someone who didn't like her. Maybe someone who wanted to hurt her. Probably I just picked that up from Joe—the way her nerves seemed all strung up, the way she kept looking over my shoulder at the house even while she was hugging me . . . but it seemed like something else. Like a . . . I don't know . . .

"Like a vibe."

Yes," he almost shouted. "A vibration. But not a good vibration, like in the Beach Boys song. A *bad* vibration."

"What happened?"

I sat and waited. I only smoked two cigarettes so I can't guess it could have been longer than twenty minutes or half an hour, but it

You watched the game for awhile, then went back to the house along The Street."

"Yes," he said.

"Did either of you go in?"

No. By the time we got there, her buzz had worn off and I trusted her to drive. She was laughing while we were at the softball game, but she wasn't laughing by the time we got back to the house. She looked at it and said, "I'm done with her. I'll never go through that door again, Frank."

My skin first chilled, then prickled.

I asked her what was wrong, what she'd found, but I knew she was writing something, she'd told me that much—

She told everyone but me. I said — but without much bitterness I knew who the man in the brown sportcoat had been, and any bitterness or anger — anger at Jo, anger at myself — paled before the reality of that. I hadn't realized how much that fellow had been on my mind until now.

She must have had her reasons, Frank said. "You know that, don't you?"

"But she didn't tell you what they were."

All I know is that it started — whatever it was — with her doing research for an article. It was a lark. Jo playing Nancy Drew. I'm pretty sure that at first it felt like you was just to keep it a surprise. She read books but mostly she talked to people — listened to their stories of the old days and teased them into looking for old letters — diaries — she was good at that part of it, I think. Damned good. "You don't know any of this?"

No, I said heavily. Jo hadn't been having an affair, but she *could* have had one, if she'd wanted. She could have had an affair with Tom Sellick and been written up in *Focus* and I would have gone on tapping away at the keys of my PowerBook, blissfully unaware.

Whatever she found out, Frank said, I think she just stumbled over it."

And you never told me. Four years and you never told me any of it.

That was the last time I was with her, Frank said, and now he

willing to set aside the lazy thinking and selective remembering. It was *artificially* true. I was the one who had first broached the idea of a place in western Maine. I was the one who collected stacks of real estate brochures and nailed them home. I'd started buying regional magazines like *Dorset Life* and always began at the back, where the real estate ads were. It was I who had first seen a picture of Sara Laugh's in a glossy handout called *Maine Real Estate*—and it was I who had made the call first to the agent named in the ad, and then to Marie Hingerman after badgering Marie's name out of the Realtor.

Jonathan had also been charmed by Sara Laugh's. I think anyone would have been charmed by it—seeing it for the first time in autumn sunshine with the trees blazing all around it and drifts of colored leaves blowing up The Street—but it was I who had actively sought the place out.

Except that was more lazy thinking and selective remembering. Wasn't it? Sara had sought *me* out.

That was could I tell her that now it didn't? And how did I feel back in the first place, full of unknowing happy ignorance?

The answer to both questions was the same. It was also the answer to the question of how Jon could have discovered something distressing about the house, the lake, maybe the whole TR, and then gotten away without telling me. I'd been gone—that's all. I'd been zoning, tranced out, writing one of my stupid little books. I'd been hypnotized by the fantasies going on in my head, and a hypnotized man is easy to lead.

"Mike? Are you still there?"

Jon was. Frank. But I'd be goddamned if I know what could have scared her so.

She mentioned one other name I remember. Royce Merrill. She said he was the one who remembered the most because he was so old. And she said, "I don't want Mike to talk to him. I'm afraid that old man might let the cat out of the bag and tell him more than he should know. Any idea what she meant?"

Well—it's been suggested that a splinter from the old family tree would split me. That my mother's people are from Memphis. The Norans are from Maine, but not from this part. Yet I no longer entirely believed this.

BAG OF BONNS

'Mike, you sound almost sick.'

'I'm okay. Better than I was, actually'

if I'd known the ideas you were getting . . . if I'd had any *idea*

with, but once that shit starts to creep in, it's

[illegible]

Or the way she'd take a picture of a fish, put it in a jar, and say, "by mistake." I said, "She claimed doing that would turn around your whole day."

"Well? Doesn't it?" Frank asked, and I could hear a little smile in his voice.

All attendees numbered 1 to 100, each with a unique name. The flock number left on each wing was a two-digit number. No flock number

She thought there was something I was not saying. Frank said "That much I *do* know."

I drew a piece of paper to me and wrote back: 'Yes. As you say, she may have suspected I was plotting. So, I was not a very good influence. There were others as well. I am. Yes, I did get most of this from Royce Merrill.'

Not that was just a chance she mentioned. She's a very intelligent girl, lots of people. Do you know Jack and the Kestrel? It's not like that, something like that?"

"Auster," I said. Below *Kita* my pencil was making a series of fat loops that might have been cursive letters. "K... A... Was that it?"

It sounds right. In any case, it's a hell of a way to pass the time, and you've got going on a thing."

Yes. Like a terrier after rats.

"Mike? Should I come up there?"

Now I assure Northridge that we will not let this happen.

was a process going on in Sara, something as delicate and as organic as rising bread in a warm room. Frank might interrupt that process—or be hurt by it.

No, I just wanted to get it cleared up. Besides, I'm writing. It's hard for me to have people around when I'm writing.

"Will you call if I can help?"

"You bet," I said.

I hung up the telephone, thumbed through the book, and found a listing for K. MARSH on the Deep Bay Road. I called the number, listened to it ring a dozen times, then hung up. No newfangled answering machine for Royce. I wondered, really, where he was. Ninety-five seemed a little too old to go dancing at the Country Barn in Harrison, especially on a close night like this one.

I looked at the paper with *Kia* written on it. Below the fat *i* shapes I wrote *Kjia* and remembered I had, the first time I'd heard Ki say her name. I'd thought it was 'Ka'—she was saying. Below *Kjia* I wrote *Kit*. I hesitated, then wrote *Guik*. I put these names in a box. Beside them I jotted *Jessica*, *Bonnet*, and *Jared*. The triage-tator people. Folks who wanted me to go down nineteen and go down ninety-two.

"Crown Moses, you found the Promised Land," I told the empty house. I looked around. Just me and Banter and the waggy clock . . . except it wasn't.

When it wanted you, it called you.

I got up to get another beer. The fruits and vegetables were in a circle again. In the middle, the letters now spelled,

lye stille

As on some of the milestones—*Gravel and water still*. I looked at these letters for a long time. Then I remembered the IBM was still out on the deck. I brought it in, plugged it in the dining room table, and began to work on my current stupid little book. Fifteen minutes and I was lost, only faintly aware of thunder somewhere over the lake, only faintly aware of Banter's cell shivering from time to time. When I went back

BAG OF JONES

the bridge at night and so I thought I'd write a poem about it
in the circle now said.

ony lye stille

Hardy in fact. At night in fact. I had been thinking of
the back by the light of the silver moon. I had been
begin to remember his past. I had been thinking of
had been. Little neglected Ray Garraty

I wrote until midnight. By then the moon was
out the heat had been, as if by magic, a dark. I had been IBM
and were to be. I was sitting in a room. I had been
not even about Mateo. I was sitting in a room. I had been
The writing had burned off all thoughts. I had been sitting in a room.
I think that in the end that was what it was. I had been sitting in a room.
passes the time.

CHAPTER

21

I was walking north along The Street. Japanese lanterns lined it, but they were all dark because it was daylight — *mitoku* Daylight. The maggy, smudgy look of mid July was gone: the sky was that deep sapphire shade which is the sole property of October. The lake was deepest indigo beneath it, sparkling with sunpoints. The trees were just past the peak of their autumn colors, burning like torches. A wind out of the south blew the fallen leaves past me and between my legs in rattly, fragrant gusts. The Japanese lanterns nodded as if in approval of the season. Up ahead, faintly, I could hear music. Sara and the Red Tops. Sara was belting it out, laughing her way through the lyrics as she always had. Only, how could laughter sound so much like a snarl?

White boy. I'd never kill a child of mine. That you'd even think it!

I whirled, expecting to see her right behind me, but there was no one there. Well . . .

The Green Lady was there, only she had changed her dress of leaves for autumn and become the Yellow Lady. The bare pine branches around her stalk pointed the way: go north, young man, go north. Not much farther.

come to a time before Royce had even been born. Sara Tidwell was here. I could hear her singing, and when Royce had been born in 1903, Sara had already been gone for two years, she and her whole Red Top family.

Go down, Moses. I told the ribbon-wrapped cane in the water "You bound for the Promised Land."

I walked on toward the sound of the music, invigorated by the cool air and rushing wind. Now I could hear voices as well. Lots of them, talking and shouting and laughing. Rising above them and pumping like a piston was the hoarse cry of a sideshow barker. "Come on in, folks, *hurr-ay, hurr-ay, hurr-ay!* It's all on the inside but you've got to *hurr-ay*, next show starts in ten minutes. See Angelina the Snake-Woman, she slithers, she snakes, she'll bewitch your eye and steal your heart, but don't get too close for her bite is poisonous. See Handel the Dog-Faced Boy, terror of the South Seas! See the Human Skeleton. See the Human Gila Monster, take of a time God forgit. See the Bearded Lady and all the Killer Martians! It's on the inside, yessuree, so *hurr-ay, hurr-ay, hurr-ay!*"

I could hear the steam-driven calliope of a merry-go-round and the bing of the bell at the top of the post as some lumberjack won a scaffold toy for his sweetie. You could tell from the delighted feminine screams that he'd hit it almost hard enough to pop it off the post. There was the snap of .22s from the shooting gallery, the snoring moo of someone's prize cow—and now I began to smell the aromas I have associated with county fairs since I was a boy: sweet fried dough, grilled onions and peppers, cotton candy, manure, hay. I began to walk faster as the stream of ganders and head-of-deable hassles grew thicker. My heart kicked into a midget gallop as I was going to see them perform, actually see Sara Laughs and the Red Tops live on I-on-stage. This was no crazy three-part fever dream, either. This was happening right now, so *hurr-ay, hurr-ay, hurr-ay!*

The Washburn place (the one that would always be the Bricker place to Mrs. Mow) was gone. Beyond where it would eventually be, rising up the steep slope on the eastern side of The Street, was a flight of brick wooden stairs. They reminded me of the ones which lead down from the amusement park to the beach at Old Orchard. Here the Japanese lanterns were lit in spite of the brightness of the day, and the music was louder than ever. Sara was singing Jimmy Crack Corn.

in my ears, as of a million voices, very far away. Sighing in relief: Dismay? I couldn't tell. All I knew for sure was that being on the other side was different—the difference between looking at a thing through a window and actually being there, the difference between observing and participating.

Colors jumped out like ambushers at the moment of attack. The smells which had been sweet and evocative and nostalgic on the inside side of the arch were now rough and sexy, prose instead of poetry. I could smell dense sausages and frying beef and the vast shadowy aroma of burning chocolate. Two kids walked past me sharing a paper cone of cotton candy. Both of them were clutching knitted tankies with their little bits of change in them. "Hey kids," a barker in a dark blue suit called to them. He was wearing arm-garters and his smile revealed one splendid gold tooth. "Knock over the milk bottles and win a prize! I can't find a loser all day!"

Up ahead, the Rex Tops swung into Fashion Buies. I'd thought the kid on the common in Castle Rock was pretty good, but this version made the kid's waltz and slow and clueless. It wasn't cute—like an antique picture of ladies with their skirts held up to their knees, dancing a decorous version of the black bottom with the edges of their bloomers showing. It wasn't something Alan Lomax had collected with his other folk songs, just one more daisy American butterfly in a glass case full of them, this was smart with just enough shine on it to keep the whole struttin' bunch of them out of jail. Sara Tidwell was singing about the city jungle, and I guessed that every overtilled, straw-hatted, plug-chewing, canvas-banded, cloth-happy or wearing farmer standing in front of the stage was dreaming about doing it with her, getting right down to where the sweat forms in the crease and the heat gets hot and the pink comes glimmering through.

I started walking in that direction, aware of cows moaning and sheep blatting from the exhibition barns—the Earth's version of my childhood Hi-Hi Dairy. O. I walked past the shooting gallery and the ring toss and the penny pitch, I walked past a stage where The Han Imadens of Angelina were weaving in a slow, snake-like dance with their hands pressed together as a guy with a turban on his head and shoe-polish on his face tooted a flute. The picture painted on stretched canvas suggested that Angelina—on view inside for just one rental of a dollar, enough

and saw they were homemade. I would find no discreet little label reading *Made in Mexico* or *Made in China* if I took off her straw hat and looked inside either. This hat had been most likely *Made in Motton*, by some farmer's wife with red hands and achy joints.

"Ki, where's Mattie?"

"Home, I guess. She couldn't come."

"How did you get here?"

Up the stairs. It was a lot of stairs. You should have waited for me. You could have carried me like before. I want to hear the music."

"Me too. Do you know who that is, Kyra?"

"Yes," she said, "Kito's mom. Hurry up, slowpoke!"

I walked toward the stage, thinking we'd have to stand at the back of the crowd, but they parted for us as we came forward, me carrying Kyra in my arms—the lovely sweet weight of her, a little Gibson Girl in her sateen dress and ribbon-accented straw hat. Her arm was curled around my neck and they parted for us like the Red Sea had parted for Moses.

They didn't turn to look at us either. They were clapping and stomping and belowing along with the music, totally involved. They stepped aside unconsciously, as if some kind of magnetism were at work here, ours positive, theirs negative. The few women in the crowd were blushing, but clearly enjoying themselves. One of them, laughing so hard tears were streaming down her face. She looked no more than twenty-two or three. Kyra pointed to her and said matter-of-factly, "You know Mattie's boss at the liberry? That's her nana."

Lord, Bridges, in leather and fedora, a deity. I thought *Good Christ*.

The Red Tops were spread across the stage and under swags of red, white, and blue bunting like some time-travelling rock band. I recognized all of them from the picture in Edward Osteen's book. The men wore white shirts, tan garters, dark vests, dark pants. Son Tidwell, at the far end of the stage, was wearing the derby he'd had on in the photo Sara, though . . .

"Why is this lady wearing Mattie's dress?" Kyra asked me, and she began to tremble.

"I don't know, honey. I can't say. Nor could I argue—it was the white sleeveless dress Mattie had been wearing on the common, all right."

PAG OF BONES

[illegible]

Sara backed away from Sam, shaking her head and crying silently, and laughing. He stroled back to his spot on the dance floor, as the band played the tango and she danced to the music. As the band played the tango and she danced to the music, she looked directly at me.

"Before you start in fishin
you better check your line
Said before you start in fishin honey,
you better check on your line
I'll pull on yours darlin
and you best tug on mine."

The crowd roared loudly. In my ears, however, she said, "I'm over. I'm scared. Miss, she said, 'I don't like that. I like. She's a lady. She stole Mattie's dress. I want to go home.'"

It was also shown that $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \|x(t)\| = 0$ if $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{t} \int_0^t \lambda(s) ds = \infty$ and $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{t} \int_0^t \lambda(s) ds = \infty$.

head cocked back on her neck, her lips peeled open, and she laughed at the sky. Her teeth were big and yellow. They looked like the teeth of a hungry animal, and I decided I agreed with Kyr: she was a scary lady.

"Okay, pon—" I murmured in Kyr's ear. "We're out of here."

But before I could move, the sense of the woman—I don't know how else to say it—fell upon me and held me. Now I understood what had snatched past me in the kitchen to knock away the CARADEAN letters, the one I was the same. It was almost like identifying a person by the sound of their walk.

She led the band to the barnyard once more, then into another verse. Not one you'd find in any written version of the song, though.

*"I ain't gonna hurt her boney,
not for all the treasure in the world.
Said I wouldn't hurt your baby,
not for diamonds or for pearls.
Only one black-bearded bastard
dare to touch that little girl."*

The crowd reacted as if it were the funnest thing they'd ever heard, but Kyr began to cry. Sara saw this and stuck out her breasts—much bigger breasts than Mattie's—and shook them at her, laughing her trademark laugh as she did. There was a particular coldness about this gesture—and an emptiness too. A sadness. Yet I could feel no compassion for her. It was as if the heart had been burned out of her and the sadness which remained was just another ghost, the memory of love haunting the bones of hate.

And how her laughing teeth leered.

Sara raised her arms over her head and this time shook it all the way down, as if reading my thoughts and mocking them. Just like jelly on a plate, as some other old song of the time has it. Her shadow wavered on the canvas backdrop, which was a painting of Fryeburg, and as I looked at it I realized I had found the Shape from my Manderley dreams. It was Sara. Sara was the Shape and always had been.

No, Mike. That's close, but it's not right.

BAG OF BONDS

Results were also consistent with the hypothesis that the effects of KYN treatment on the growth of *S. aureus* are dependent on the concentration of KYN used. The growth of *S. aureus* was not significantly affected by the addition of 0.05 or 0.1% KYN to the medium.

[illegible][illegible]

"Excuse me," I said, brushing by him.

There's no town drink here, you might say, so let's just never look at me and I'll never miss going to a bar. We'll just take turns."

[illegible]

But the smell of blood on my shirt was a great reality. The towel wasn't a dream and the weight of the red dress on my arms wasn't a dream either. My shirt is black and wet and it was pressed. She was crying.

Hey, I wish! Since I feel from the studies that the chances of success are small that I could have seen a USeward set a certain goal. I don't know, but I will be working on the sides of my own life for the rest of my life.

I judged it and three others were set aside. The other three from England and the other three from the U.S. It was

ahead, wide as Fifth Avenue, and at the end of it was the arch, the steps, The Street—the lake—Home. If I could get to The Street we'd be safe. I was sure of it.

"Ain't done, Irish!" Sara shrieked after me. She sounded angry, but not too angry to laugh. "You gonna get what you want, sugar, all the comfort you need, but you want to let me finish my business. Do you hear me, boy? Just stand clear! Mind me, now!"

I began to hurry back the way I had come, stroking Ki's head, still holding her face against my shirt. Her straw hat fell off and when I grabbed for it, I got nothing but the ribbon, which pulled free of the brim. No matter. We had to get out of here.

On our left was the baseball pitch and some little boy sneaking Willy hit it over the fence. Ma! Willy hit it over the fence with monstrous brain-ruggering regularity. We passed the Bingo, where some woman howled that she had won the turkey, by glory, every number was covered with a button and she had won the turkey. Overhead, the sun dove behind a cloud and the day went dull. Our shadows disappeared. The arch at the end of the midway drew closer with maddening slowness.

"Are we home yet?" Ki almost moaned. "I want to go home, Mike, please take me home to my mommy."

"I will," I said. "Everything's going to be all right."

We were passing the Test Your Strength pole where the young man with the red hair was putting his shirt back on. He looked at me with steady, calm, the instinctive mistrust of a native for an interloper, perhaps—and I realized I knew him, too. He'd have a grandson named Drake who would, toward the end of the century to which this fair had been dedicated, own the All Purpose Garage on Route 66.

A woman coming out of the quilting booth stopped and pointed at me. At the same moment her upper lip lifted in a dog's snarl. I knew that face, too. From where? Somewhere around town. It didn't matter, and I didn't want to know even if it did.

"We never should have come here," Ki moaned.

"I know how you feel," I said. "But I don't think we had any choice, hon. We—"

rather. A man who had grown up to be one of the most respected elders in Castle County was all but liking Devore's boots.

Don't take the side of the Devil, Jo, he whispered. *Don't take the side of any of them. They were very young.*

You don't need to do nothing, Devore said. His reedy voice was irritated. Fred Dean looked abashed. He's going to hand her over on his own. And if he don't, we'll take her together."

I looked at the man on the far left, the third of those that seemed totally real, totally there. Was this me? It didn't look like me. There was something in the face that seemed familiar but

'Hand her over, Irish,' Devore said. "Last chance."

"No."

Devore nodded as if this was exactly what he had expected. Then we'll take her. This has got to end. Come on, boys."

They started toward me and as they did I realized who the one on the end—the one in the caulked tree-walker boots and flannel joggers pants—reminded me of: Kenny Auster, whose wolfhound would eat cake if it tasted Kenny Auster, whose baby brother had been drowned under the pump by Kenny's father.

I looked behind me. The Red Tips were still playing, Sara was still laughing, shaking her hips with her hands in the sky, and the crowd was still plugging the east end of the midway. That way was no good, any way. If I went that way, I'd end up raising a little girl, in the early years of the twentieth century, trying to make a living by writing penny dreadfuls and dime novels. That might not be so bad—but there was a lonely young woman miles and years from here who would miss her. Who might even miss us both.

I turned back and saw the jackboys were almost on me. Some of them more here than others, more vital, but all of them dead. All of them vanished. I looked at the rowhead whose descendants would include Kenny Auster and asked him: "What did you do? What in Christ's name did you men do?"

He held out his hands. Give her over, Irish. That's all we have to do. You and the woman can have more. All the more you want. She's young, she'll pop em out like watermelon seeds."

them now she was telling them that if they broke anything inside they'd have to give up the goods. 'You mind me, you damned rubes!' she shouted. 'That place is for kids, not th' likes of you!'

The rumble was directly ahead of us. Something was turning. At first I couldn't make out what it was.

'Put me down, Mike!' Kyra sounded excited. 'I want to go through by myself!'

I set her on her feet, then looked nervously back over my shoulder. The bright light at the entryway was blocked out as they tried to cram in.

'You asses!' Devore yelled. 'Not all at the same time! Sweet weeping Jesus!' There was a smack and someone cried out. I faced front just in time to see Kyra fall through the rolling barrel, holding her hands out for balance. Incredibly, she was laughing.

I followed, got halfway across, then went down with a thump.

'Ooops!' Kyra called from the far side, then giggled as I tried to get up, fell again, and was tumbled all the way over. The bandanna fell out of my back pocket. A bag of horeadine candy dropped from another pocket. I tried to look back to see if they had got themselves sorted out and were coming. When I did, the barrel hurled me through another inadvertent somersault. Now I knew how clothes felt in a dryer.

I crawled to the end of the barrel, got up, took Ki's hand, and let her lead us deeper into the Ghost House. We got perhaps ten paces before white plumed around her like a dilly and she screamed. Some animal—something that seemed like a huge cat—hissed heavily. Adrenaline dumped into my bloodstream and I was about to jerk her backward into my arms again when the hiss came once more. I felt hot air on my ankles, and Ki's dress made that bell shape around her legs again. This time she laughed instead of screaming.

'Go, Ki!' I whispered. "Fast."

We went on, leaving the steam vent behind. There was a mirrored corridor where we were reflected first as squat dwarves and then as scrawny ecto-morphs with long white vampire features. I had to urge Kyra on again; she wanted to make faces at herself. Bearded as I heard cursing lumberjacks trying to negotiate the barrel, I could hear Devore cursing, too, but he no longer seemed so—well, *so certain*.

BAG OF BONDS

There was a slight reduction in the number of birds that made a second attempt to swoop at the chick after the first failed attempt. However, the number of birds that made a second attempt to swoop at the chick after the first failed attempt was not significantly different from the number of birds that made a first attempt to swoop at the chick after the first failed attempt.

Her fear seemed to have entirely departed.

[illegible]

We went on for what. It like a very long time. I remember not no longer hear the calicoes this party. I remember the First Year's bell, or Sara and the Red-bell. Nor was there anything. We must have walked a quarter of a mile. How could an empty of this House be so big.

We came to three doors. The one on the left opened the way to the one set into the end of the corridor. On the wall attached to the door was painted. On the door facing it was my good IBM typewriter. The picture on the door at the end of the corridor and the typewriter at the end. It showed a chess board. *Port. Chess. Port.* The chess board was a *Port. Chess. Port.* A rather large chess board on my desk and a

Well, Kyra said brightly, but I couldn't see the stars, presumably so he could see the red truck.

"Yeah," I said, "I guess so."

Thank you for taking me away so soon. I'll always remember
 what the spookhouse was like on Halloween night. See you next year
 too. It still aches at some point, even though I'm a Victorian society
 for sublime happiness.

Before I could say another word, she had pushed open the door with the trike on it and stepped through. It snapped shut behind her, and as it did I saw the ribbon from her hat. It was hanging out of the bib pocket of the overalls I was wearing. I looked at it a moment, then tried the knob of the door she had just gone through. It wouldn't turn, and when I slapped my hand against the wood it was like slapping some hard and fabulously dense metal. I stepped back, then cocked my head in the direction from which we'd come. There was nothing. Total silence.

This is the narrow door. I thought. When people talk about "leaving the cage," they speak of it as if they will escape. This is the place where they really go.

You're not going away. Jo told me. If you don't want to find yourself trapped here, then you first have to get yourself going.

I tried the knob of the door with the typewriter painted on it. It turned easily. Behind it was another narrow corridor—more wooden walls and the sweet smell of pine. I didn't want to go in there, something about it made me think of a long station, but there was nothing else to go nowhere else to go. I went, and the door slammed shut behind me.

Come, I thought. I lost the door, not the impulse. It's the same as Michael Noonan's world-famous panic attacks.

But my hands clamped themselves over my chest, and although my heart rate was high and my muscles were stillacked in adrenaline, I was under control. Also, I realized, it wasn't entirely dark. I could only see a little, but enough to make out the walls and the plank floor. I wrapped the dark blue ribbon from Jo's hat around my wrist, tucking one end underneath so it wouldn't come loose. Then I began to move forward.

I went on for a long time, the corridor turning this way and that, seemingly at random. I felt like a marble slipping through an intestine. At last I came to a pair of wooden arched doorways. I stood before them wondering which was the correct choice, and realized I could hear Buster's bell faintly through the one to my left. I went that way and as I walked the bell grew steadily louder. At some point the sound of the bell was viced by the mutter of thunder. The autumn cool had left the air and it was hot again—stifling. I looked down and saw that the

It was J., I had never heard her scream like that in our life together, but I knew who it was, just the same. Stop hurting her. I shouted into the darkness. "Whoever you are, *stop hurting her!*"

She screamed again, as if something with a knife, clamp, or hot poker took a malicious delight in discomfiting me. It seemed to come from a distance this time, and her third scream, while just as agonized as the first two, was farther away still. They were diminishing as the little boy's sobbing had diminished.

A fourth scream floated out of the dark, then Sara was silent. Breathless, the house creaked around me. Alive in the heat, aware in the faint sound of dawn thunder.

CHAPTER

22

I was finally able to get into the zone, at least for a moment. I got there. I kept a stenopod in my hands, and notes, references, catechisms, and I was in the zone. The sheet of paper in the IBM remained blank. There was no heartbeat, no throbbing eyes, no difficulty breathing, no pain at all. In other words, but there was no story either. Art, Dick, Tom, Shackelford, Ray Garratt, Jack, Arthur, Reginald, all stood with their backs turned, refusing to speak to me. The stenopod was sitting in its accustomed place on the table, its ink reservoir full, pages held down with a pretty blank of carriage bolts, but nothing was happening. Zilch.

I recognized many here, perhaps even names. I tried to solve the problems of the red world, escaping into the New World, imagination. Now the red world had been up with some of the best, there were things with text and images, and the world was locked against me.

Kiss. I had printed, nature, not me. I was not a man. I was supposed to be a woman. Below the line, not a man.

with a beret taped rakishly on the top crust. Noonan's conception of French toast. The letters L.B. surrounded with carlicules. A shirt with a rudimentary duck on it. Beside this I had printed *Get it & get it &*. Below *get it & get it &* I had written *Get it to fly away. Bon Voyage*.

At another spot on the sheet I had written *Dean Austin*, and *Devin*. They were the ones who had seemed the most there, the most dangerous. Because they had descendants? But surely all seven of those jacks must, mustn't they? In those days most families were whoppers. And where had I been? I had asked, but Devin hadn't wanted to say.

It didn't feel any more like a dream at nine-thirty on a sullenly hot Sunday morning. Which left exactly what? Visions? Time travel? And if there was a purpose to such travel, what was it? What was the message, and, who was trying to send it? I remembered clearly what I'd said just before passing from the dream in which I had sleepwalked out to Jos's studio and brought back my typewriter. *I don't share these lies*. Not would I now. Until I could see at least some of the truth, it might be safer to believe nothing at all.

At the top of the sheet upon which I was doodling, in heavily stroked letters, I printed the word DANGER!, then circled it. From the circle I drew an arrow to Kyra's name. From her name I drew an arrow to *Get it to fly away "Bon Voyage"* and added *MATTIE*.

Below the bread wearing the beret I drew a little telephone. Above it I put a cartoon balloon with R R R NO GO in it. As I finished this, the cordless phone rang. It was sitting on the deck rail. I circled *Get it* and picked up the phone.

"Mike?" She sounded excited. Happy. Relieved.

"Yeah," I said. "How are you?"

"Great!" she said, and I circled L.B. on my pad.

Indy Briggs called ten minutes ago. "I just got off the phone with her Mike, she's giving me my job back! Isn't that wonderful?"

Sure. And wonderful how it would keep her in town. I crossed out *Get it to fly away. Bon Voyage*, knowing that Mattie wouldn't go. Not now. And how could I ask her to? I thought again *If only I knew a little more...*

"Mike? Are you..."

BAG OF BONDS

[illegible]

She did. And she was taking a big risk. "I was afraid," she said. She said the Whittier rowing team was "a great, tight-knit group." Frank and the point lady said yes to her. But she said, "I had to appeal to the money computer people at the school. I had to tell them the history was keeping me up at night. I had to say, 'I need money. I need to get out of here.'"

And money would stop the school. So she said she had to leave the good of the community, against what she knew was wrong. "It was one of the toughest decisions she ever had to make . . .

Uh-huh. On the pad my hand makes a low, wavy, rhythmic pattern, the panchette gliding over a On a board, printing the words "surrender" in reverse. "There's probably some truth in that, Mr. . . . I wonder, do you suppose *Lindy* makes?"

'I don't know.'

"There is more than any other state, I would say, in the state of Maine combined."

In the background, hears K. (can I talk Matt? (CUT TO) K. Mike? Please can't I please

In a minute lion then to me. "Ma— All I know is that I
 me got back and I now going to let you on the floor."

On the page I drew a duck. The duck was a simple cartoon duck, like the one between it and the duck tee-shirt.

K. wants to tell you a little more about how you went to the Fryeburg Fair last night.

What you may find useful will depend on what you're looking for.

"Seems that way. Are you ready for her?"

"Ready "

"Okay, here comes the chatterbox "

There was a rustling as the paper crumpled and then K. wrote: 'It guided you, right? The Mark. I took my own letter "X".'

Did you?" I asked. "That was quite a dream, wasn't it, Ki?"

There was a long silence at the other end. I could imagine Mattie wondering what had happened to her telephone chatterbox. At last Ki said in a hesitating voice: "You there too?" *Um*. "We saw the snake dance ladies—the pole with the bell on top—we went in the spookyhouse—you fell down in the barrel!" It wasn't a dream—it was it?

I could have convinced her that it was, but all at once that seemed like a bad idea, one that was dangerous in its own way. I said: "You had on a pretty hat and a pretty dress."

Ki—Ki's face enormously relieved. "And you had on . . ."

"Kyra, stop. Listen to me."

She stopped at once.

It's better if you don't talk about that dream too much, I think. To your mom or to anyone except me."

"Except you."

Yes. And the same with the refrigerator people. Okay?"

"Okay. Mike, there was a lady in Mattie's clothes."

I know—I said. It was all right for her to talk. I was sure of it, but I asked anyway: "Where's Mattie now?"

Water in the flowers. We got lots of flowers, a billion at least. I have to clean up the table. It's a chore. I don't mind, though. I like chores. We had French toast. We always do on Sundays. It's yummy—specially with strawberry syrup."

I know—I said, drawing an arrow to the piece of bread wearing the better—French toast is great. Ki, she, you tell your mom about the lady in her dress?"

No. I think that it might scare her. She dropped her voice. "Here she comes."

"That's all right . . . but we've got a secret, right?"

"Yes."

"Now can I talk to Mattie again?"

Okay. Her voice moved off a little. Mommy bommy. Mike wants to talk to you. Then she came back. "Will you buzz it as today? We could go on another picnic."

"I can't today, Ki. I have to work."

BAG OF BONES

Mattie never works on Sundays.

When I heard that I had to go to the
Hill Country State Museum on Sunday, I
barbecue picnic at your house."

"Is it long 'til Tuesday

"Not too long. Day after tomorrow."

"Is it long to write a book?"

"Medium-long."

I could hear Mattie telling Ki to give her the phone

"I will, just one more second, Mike."

"I'm here, Ki."

"I love you."

I was so thick I didn't think for a moment I was going to say that I
was going to look up the way my chest felt when I was talking to her.
Then it cleared and I said, "Love you, too, Ki."

"Here's Mattie."

Again there was the raspy sound of the telephone. I heard Ki say
then Mattie said, "Did that refresh your memory of the great day of
my daughter, sir?"

Well, I said, it certainly refreshed hers. There was a long pause
Mattie and me, but I didn't expect this. I was sure it

She was laughing, I loved the way she said it, so she thought I
didn't want to bring her down. I could hear her want to make sure
what I said in the middle of her road, but she crossed it.

Mattie, at least I knew he had a lot of work to do. He was
offered a very good job, but he didn't want to leave his family. He was
suddenly your friend."

I understand that, she said. I thought that I had seen a
consulting kept to. I don't know what I was doing. I was
stay for the duration of the summer, that was what I was doing.
return to normal down here. I expect you will be here. I was
talking my mother to the street New York. I was talking to the
city. At that time she was. Or maybe she was. I was talking to
her name. I had no idea, no idea to that. I was talking to
a type like something. I was talking to the city. I was talking to

I want you to be careful of two men in particular. I said. One is Bill Dean. The other is Kenny Auster. He's the one—"

—with the big dog who wears the neckerchief. He—"

"That's Booberry!" Ki called from the middle distance. "Booberry licked my face!"

"Go out and play, hon," Mattie said.

"I'm clearin' the table."

"You can finish later. Go on outside now." There was a pause as she watched Ki go out the door taking Strickland with her. Although the kid had left the trailer, Mattie still spoke in the lowered tone of someone who doesn't want to be overheard. "Are you trying to scare me?"

"No," I said, drawing repeated circles around the word DANGER. "But I want you to be careful. Bill and Kenny may have been on Devore's team, like Footman and Osgood. Don't ask me why I think that might be, because I have no satisfactory answer. It's only a feeling, but since I got back on the TR, my feelings are different."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you wearing a tee-shirt with a duck on it?"

"How do you know that? Did Ki tell you?"

"Did she take the little stuffed dog from her Happy Meal out with her just now?"

A long pause. At last she said, "My God," in a voice so low I could hardly hear it. Then again: "How—?"

"I don't know how. I don't know if you're still in a— a bad situation either, or why you might be, but I feel that you are. That you both are. I wish I've said more, but I was afraid I would think I'd gone entirely off the rails."

"He said it," she burst out. "That old man is *scared*. Why can't he leave us alone?"

"Maybe he has. Maybe I'm wrong about all this. But there's no harm in being careful, is there?"

"No," she said. "Usually that's true."

"Usually?"

"Why don't you come and see me, Mike? Maybe we could go to the Fair together."

BAG OF BONDS

"Maybe this fall we will. All three of us."

"I'd like that."

"In the meantime, I'm thinking about the key."

Thinking about it, I picked up Magnabet's letter. I was
Rachael Frank. It said, "I was at the house. What
I understood was that I was with you. I
end I think it rocks most of us to death."

I worked for a while, then carried on. I had a lot of
the manuscript on it. I was so happy. I was so
No more looking for the key. I had it. I had it.
An A Drake and I am Shackleford. It was a very good
a long pants and a lot of things. I had a lot of things.
weeks, it accepted that that person was there. I had
been trying to see to it with the story. I was in. I was
working again. It made sense. I was so happy. I was
even better than before. I had a lot of things. I had
a nice cabinet. Or maybe work was in the house. I was
with all the dreamy dreams inside it. Maybe I had
Being in the zone. I was so happy. I was so happy.
say. I was in the zone and I was really feeling it.

I grabbed the keys to the Chevrolet. It was a very good
trudge as I did. The magnets were on the wall. I was
mass ge I had seen before. I was so happy. I was
thanks to the extra Magnabet letters.

help her

"I'm doing my best," I said, and went out.

Three miles north on 20th Street. I was so happy. I was
a street known as Castle Rock Road. It was a very good
in front of it. I was so happy. I was so happy.
of time there. I was so happy. I was so happy.
was a wonderful day. I was so happy. I was so happy.

I pulled in there at around ten o'clock that Sunday morning; it was open, of course, during tourist season; almost every Maine shopkeeper turns leatheren and parked next to a Beamer with New York plates. I paused long enough to hear the weather forecast on the radio—continued hot and humid for another forty-eight hours at least—and then got out. A woman wearing a bathing suit, a skirt, and a giant yellow sun hat emerged from the shop with a big ol' peat moss cradled in her arms. She gave me a little smile. I returned it with eighteen per cent interest. She was from New York, and that meant she wasn't a Martian.

The shop was even hotter and damper than the white morning outside. Lila Proulx, the co-owner, was on the phone. There was a little fan beside the cash register and she was standing directly in front of it, flapping the front of her sleeveless blouse. She saw me and twiddled her fingers in a wave. I twiddled mine back, feeling like someone else. Work or no work, I was still zoning. Still feeling it.

I walked around the shop, picking up a few things almost at random, watching Lila out of the corner of my eye and waiting for her to get off the phone so I could talk to her—and all the time my own private hyperdrive was humming softly away. At last she hung up and I came to the counter.

Michael Newman, "what a sight for sore eyes you are," she said, and began ringing up my purchases. I was awfully sorry to hear about Johanna. Got to get that right up front. Jo was a pet.

"Thanks, Lila."

Welcome. Don't need to say any more about it, but with a thing like that it's best to put it right up front. I've always believed it, always will believe it. Right up front. Going to do a little gunkin' are you? *Gointer do a little ga'adnin, aaa you?*

"If it ever cools off."

"Ayah. Isn't it wicked?" She tapped the top of her blouse again to show me how wicked it was, then pointed at one of my purchases. "Want this cactus in a special bag? Always safe, never sorry, that's my motto."

I nodded, then looked at the little blackboard tacked against the counter. FRESH COBBLERS, the chalked message read. THE CAUPIS N'

BAG OF BONES

day's. I can do better than Friday.

$$\mathbb{N}[\mathbf{h}_1, \dots, \mathbf{h}_d] \subset \mathbb{C}[\mathbf{h}_1, \dots, \mathbf{h}_d] \quad \text{if } \mathbf{h}_1, \dots, \mathbf{h}_d \in \mathbb{N}^d \quad \text{and} \quad \mathbf{h}_1, \dots, \mathbf{h}_d \text{ are linearly independent.}$$

Illegitimate work is a direct by-product of the illegitimate labor market.

[illegible]

At the university, C. J. was a student leader. He turned it up a bit when someone left a bag of money in another bag for me.

"Where's Helen?" I asked. "Day off."

[illegible]

together, Mike!

Couldn't they do that? There's so many stories out there about anyone who doubts it has never been true. New England was there. Where there was no business, it didn't like it. It was a disaster. An Elit Kyra and I were doing the film in the middle of the night. The people in TR 2000 were doing it. Perhaps we were the only ones. We shared the same air and we shared the same time. We were the only ones who lay below everything, but I was the only one who was the only one. We shared the street as well that night when the police could walk side by side.

As I started to chat with my parents, I felt a little nervous. I said, "What a shame about R. M. ... I hope you're ..."

"No," I said.

Fell down his caddis, but it stayed there. When he came back, he was doing good down stream, so he had to stop, so he went back. He said, "I'm not even getting to my age and I've got a lot of things to do."

Is he dead? I started to ask, then rephrased. It wasn't the way the question was expressed on the TR. "Did he pass?"

Not yet. Mutton Rescue took him to Castle County General. He's in a coma. *Critters* she said it. "They don't think he'll ever wake up. poor fella. There's a piece of history that'll die with him."

I suppose that's true. *Good, I believe.* I thought. "Does he have children?"

No. There have been Merrills on the TR for two hundred years, one died at Cemetery Ridge. But all the old families are dying out now. You have a nice day, Mike. She smiled. Her eyes remained flat and considering.

I got into my Chevy, put the bag with my purchases in it on the passenger seat, then simply sat for a moment, letting the air conditioner pour cool air on my face and neck. Kenny Auster was in Taxachusetts. That was good. A step in the right direction.

But there was still my caretaker.

Bill's not here. Yvette said. She stood in the door, checking it as well as she could (you can only do so much in that regard when you're five-three and weigh roughly a hundred pounds), studying me with the gimlet gaze of a nightclub bouncer denying re-entry to a drunk who's been tossed out on his ear once already.

I was on the porch of the neat-as-ever-you-saw Cape Cod when stands at the top of Peabody Hill, and looks all the way across New Hampshire and into Vermont's back yard. Bill's equipment sheds were lined up to the left of the house, all of them painted the same shade of gray, each with its own sign: DEAN CARETAKING, No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3. Parked in front of No. 2 was Bill's Dodge Ram. I looked at it, then back at Yvette. Her lips tightened a little more. Another notch and I figured they'd be gone entirely.

He went to North Conway with Butch Waggers, she said. They went in Butch's truck. To get—"

No need lying for me, dear heart. Bill said from behind her.

It was still over an hour's try of noon, and on the Lord's Day to boot, but I had never heard a man who sounded more tired. He clamped down the hatch, and as he came out of its shadow and into the light—the sun was finally burning through the mark—I saw that Bill now looked his

BAG OF BONES

[illegible]

Bill's strong, hairy, calloused, and wrinkled fingers shook a little.

Go on the kit bench, it'll be a lot easier. I'll be right there with you. *Padre* here. 'T won't take long.'

Yvette looked at him and when she looked back at the screen, indeed reached zero lip service. There was not a single word that had been like a mark it was with the word I saw a very close to that she hated me.

Don't you tire him out," she said to me. "He isn't the only person who gets the heat." She walked back down the natural stone road, her long skirts disappearing into shadows that were probably hers. It was as if she were to be found in the house's old dream—like a ghost.

Bill came out onto the porch and put his hands on the railing. "I'll take these pants without entering to make a deal with me. I don't want to make a deal with you. You and me's quits."

'Why, Bill? Why are we quits?'

He looked west where the lights shone out at night and saw
 haze disappearing in the morning, could see nothing but
 nothing.

"I'm trying to help that young woman."

He gave me a look from the corners of his eyes that said he knew I was not enough. 'Aah! He pays right in my pants! I saw him in New York and New Jersey with the gay athletes. Saturday and Sunday, he's skw' weekends, but I don't matter. Me, who's over 100, I still got a good ass. I was like the same, get the truck stuck in the snow, the car stuck in the snow, the car shut. Now you look the same.'

I felt both angry and embarrassed, but I resisted the urge to taunt him in that direction. That was what he wanted.

"What happened here?" I asked him. "What did your fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers do to Sara Tidwell and her family? You didn't just move them on, did you?"

Didn't have to. Bil said, looking past me at the hills. His eyes were moist almost to the point of tears, but his jaw was set and hard.

"They moved 'a themselves. Never was a nigger who didn't have an itchy foot, my dad used to say."

"Who set the trap that killed Son Tidwell's boy? Was it your father, Bill? Was it Fred?"

His eyes moved, his jaw never did. "I dunno what you're talking about."

I hear him crying in my nose. Do you know what it's like to hear a dead man crying in your nose? *Somebody tarred and feathered him and I hear him crying in my fucking house!*

"You're going to need a new caretaker," Bil said. "I can't do for you no more. Don't want to. What I want is for you to get off my porch."

"What's happening? Help me, for Christ's sake."

"I'll help you with the toe of my shoe if you don't get going on your own."

I looked at him a moment longer, taking in the wet eyes and the set jaw, his divided nature written on his face.

"I lost my wife, you old bastard," I said. "A woman you claimed to love."

Now his jaw moved at last. He looked at me with surprise and injury.

"That didn't happen *here*," he said. "That didn't have anything to do with *here*. She might've been off the TR because . . . well, she might've had her reasons to be off the TR . . . but she just had a stroke. Would have happened anywhere. *Anywhere*."

"I don't believe that. I don't think you do either. *Someone followed her to Derry*, maybe because she was pregnant . . .

Bill's eyes widened. I gave him a chance to say something, but he didn't take it.

. . . or maybe just because she knew too much."

BAG OF BONDS

myself. She had a damn *stroke*."

"What did she find out? Talk to me, B.I. Please."

There was a long pause before she spoke. "If I could, I'd think of I'm doing this, so that you can be happy."

I've only got a few more to do, Mrs. ...
 side of your mind that soul ...
 whenever you do ...
 be carried by the ...

of flesh that will soon stink like mine.²

Bill turned and walked to the four little beds that were hanging on the painted boards.

Stay away from Mexico and Russia. It's a very dangerous place for that trader."

He turned back and the hazel sun was gently lighting the tracks behind his eyes. He took a bandanna from his back pocket and wiped his cheeks. "I ain't staying from this house," *Washita* Creek told me, "I came back from my vacation in the first place, but I thought I should tell you for accuracy. Mike, those two—Wash, H.I., they're not the same. Not to me. No, not from *me*."

[illegible][illegible]

"Don't you ever come back here," he told her. "You're [Dorothy] dead—miss the sweetest girl I've got." "I'll see you again," she told him. "You ever come back?" "Don't you ever!" "Don't you *ever!*"

"Please," Mrs. M. said. "Don't ask me any more questions, Mike. I can't afford to get in Bill Dean's bad books, any more'n my ma could afford to get into Normal Auster's or Fred Dean's."

I snuffed the phone to my other ear. All I want to know is

In this part of the world caretakers pretty well run the whole show. If they say to a summer fella that he should hire this carpenter or that electrician, why, that's who the summer fella hires. Or if a caretaker says this one should be fired because he ain't proving reliable, he's fired. Or so. Because what goes once for plumbers and landscapers and electricians has a ways gone twice for housekeepers. If you want to be recommended—and *be* recommended—you have to keep on the sunny side of people like Fred and Bill Dean, or Normal and Kenny Auster. Don't you see? She was almost pleading. When Bill found out I told you about what Normal Auster did to Kerry, too, he was so mad at me."

Kenny Auster's brother—the one Normal drowned under the pump—his name was Kerry?"

Ayah. I've known a lot of kids name their kids alike, think it's cute. Why I went to school with a brother and sister named Roland and Rolanda Theriault. I think Rolands in Manchester now, and Rolanda married that boy from—"

Brenda just answered one question. I'll never tell. Please."

I waited, my breath held, for the click that would come when she put her telephone back in its cradle. Instead, she spoke three words in a soft, almost regretful voice. "What is it?"

"Who was Carla Dean?"

I waited through another long pause, my hand playing with the ribbon that had come off Ki's turn-of-the-century straw hat.

"You didn't tell any one I told you anything," she said at last.

"I won't."

Carla was Bill's twin sister. She died sixty-five years ago, during the time of the Tris. The Mrs. Bil, claimed, had been set by Ki's grandfather—his going-away present to the TR. I don't know just how it happened. But I never talks about it. If you told him I told you, I'll never make another be in the TR. He'd see to it. Then, in a hopeless voice, she said: "He may know anyway."

BAG OF BONES

Based on my own experience, I suspect that the
 reader will find that Barrow shows some very interesting
 material for the student of early literature. The book is
 well over the telephone, though it is well worth a try.
 I hope that the book will be a success, and that it will
 be a great addition to the literature of the world. I hope
 "Who's here?"

No answer

down. Barring that, let's talk."

Still no answer. Not a much as a murmur of the wind in the reeds. I moos-y-neek. I sped the scribble of my hand like a comet across the paper and drew them toward me. I had put k_1, k_2, k_3, k_4, k_5 in a box. Now I scribbled over the tops, but I heard that faint, distant voice. *Kore to the rescue!* I scribbled k_1, k_2, k_3, k_4, k_5 over the tops. As M had said, *They think it's cute.*

I didn't think it was cute; I thought it was creepy.

It occurred to me that at least two of these soundalikes had drowned—Kerry Aaster under a ship's keel near Cape Cod; another dying body when she wasn't much bigger than a snailfishes—and I had seen the ghost of a third under woodchuck tracks in Kt. West of the Kt./Orwas Kt. town where ducks were supposed to

They name their kids alike, they think it's cute

How many soundlike kids had there been at the very first? I was left to think the answer to that first puzzle. I found that now that I knew the answer to the second puzzle, *How many came to the sea*, Bill had said

Carla Kerry Kuf-Kuf, a 28-year-old Kenyan, is a

I got up, switched on the light, and I spoke to her. "But I can offer the science made, never out of us, as you are, at this N. 1. for the people, in the future. And I know, from the Doctor, that the depositions that these wrongs, the fact that, as you are, my instincts are, I get on the fact, of Doctor, that, as we go now, just get in the Chevy and haul ass for Der—"

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his neck as it bumped to and fro by a hand I couldn't see. The sliding door giving in the deck began to fly open and clap shut like something hooked to a pulley. The book of *Tough Stuff* crossword puzzles on the end table and the DSS program guide blew open, their pages rattling. There was a series of rattling thuds across the floor, as if something enormous were crawling rapidly toward me, pounding its fists as it came.

A dratt— not cold but warm, like the rush of air produced by a subway train on a summer night—battered past me. In it I heard a strange voice which seemed to be saying *BYE-BYE / YE-BYE / YE-BYE* as if wishing me a good trip home. Then, as it dawned on me that the voice was actually saying *Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki*, something struck me and knocked me violently forward. It felt like a large soft fist. I tumbled over the table, clawing at it to stay up, overturning the lazy Susan with the salt and pepper shakers on it, the napkin holder, the little vase Mrs. M. had filled with daisies. The vase rolled off the table and shattered. The kitchen TV blared on, some politician talking about how inflation was on the march again. The CD player started up, crowning out the politician, it was the Rolling Stones doing a cover of Sara Tidwell's "I Regret You, Baby." Upstairs, one smoke alarm went off, then another, then a third. They were joined a moment later by the warble-whop of the Chevy's car alarm. The whole world was cacophony.

Something light and plowy seized my wrist. My head's jerk forward like a piston and slammed down on the stenopad. I watched as it pawed clumsily to a blank page, then seized the pencil which lay nearby. I gripped it like a dagger and then something wrote with it, not guiding my hand but *using* it. The hand moved slowly at first, almost dandy, then picked up speed until it was flying, almost tearing through the sheet.

help her don't go help her
don't go help her help
don't don't baby please don't
go help her help her
help her

BAG OF BONDS

I had almost reached the summit of the pass when I suddenly found myself surrounded by a flock of sheep. I was alone again.

I turned off the CD player just as Mike and I went to bed. I had a good version of Howard Stern on the radio, so I sat at the desk and listened to his rants on the smoke detectors. I heard a knock on the door and went to the guest bedroom where I was sleeping. A man in a t-shirt and jeans stood at the Cheyenne's open doorway, looking at me. "I'm sorry," he said.

With the worst of the noise kicking in, the TV was screaming in the kitchen. I went down kneeling, clutching my chest, as if the vibrations were coming at me from the front. I was looking at the screen with a dazed expression. I finally stopped sweating and realized I was still sitting there. I had popped right out of its head.

I went down to the Village Center for supper and saw a man I knew, *Ed Lam*, from the rock COMPUTE magazine. He was new to NEWTON MAINE TOWN WHERE HE GROW UP. He came to the counter and stood at the counter. The cashier, who was pretty, was a student and she looked about 17 years old. He was smiling. Most people are quite naturally. On December 1st, I saw him again. He was

[illegible]

While I was reading the story on Devore, Audrey came over and told me that Royce Merril had passed without recovering consciousness. The funeral would be Tuesday afternoon at Grace Baptist, she said. Most of the town would be there, many folks just to see Ila Meserve awarded the *Better Person* cane. Did I think I'd get over? No, I said, probably not. I thought it prudent not to add that I'd likely be attending a victory party at Mattie Devore's while Royce's funeral was going on down the road.

The usual late-Sunday afternoon flow of customers came and went while I ate: people ordering burgers, people ordering beans, people ordering chicken salad sandwiches, people buying sixpacks. Some were from the TR, some from away. I didn't notice many of them, and no one spoke to me. I have no idea who left the napkin on my newspaper, but when I put down the A section and turned to find the sports, there it was. I picked it up, meaning only to put it aside, and saw what was written on the back in big dark letters: GET OFF THE TR.

I never found out who left it there. I guess it could have been any of them.

"No, the *other* old guy. Royce Merrill."

I don't know who you mean, wait. The one with the gold cane who looked like an exhibit from *Jurassic Park*?"

"That's him."

"Bummer. Otherwise . . . ?"

Otherwise everything's under control," I said, then thought of the popped-out eyes of the cat-eater and almost laughed. What stopped me was a sense of surety that Mr. Good Humor Man was just an act. Joan had really called to ask what, if anything, was going on between me and Mattie. And what was I going to say? Nothing yet? One kiss, one instant pleasured hard on the fundamental things appy as time goes by?

But John had other things on his mind. Listen, Michael, I called because I've got something to tell you. I think you'll be both amused and amazed."

"A state we all crave," I said. "Lay it on me."

Rogette Whitmore called, and . . . you didn't happen to give her my parents' number, did you? I'm back in New York now, but she called me in Philly.

I didn't *have* your parents' number. You didn't leave it on either of your machines."

Oh, right. No apology, he seemed too excited to think of such minutiae. I began to feel excited myself, and I didn't even know what the hell was going on. I gave it to Mattie. Do you think the Whitmore woman called Mattie to get it? Would Mattie give it to her?

I'm not sure that if Mattie came upon Rogette flaming in a thoroughfare, she'd piss on her to put her out."

Valger Michael, *the end of an era*. . . . But he was laughing. "Maybe Whitmore got it the same way Devore got yours."

Probably so," I said. "I don't know what'll happen in the months ahead, but right now I'm sure she's still got access to Max Devore's personal control panel. And if anyone knows how to push the buttons on it, it's probably her. Did she call from Palm Springs?"

Unhuh. She said she'd just finished a preliminary meeting with Devore's attorneys concerning the old man's will. According to her, Grampa left Mattie Devore eighty million dollars."

"Leave him home, why don't you?" I said. "There'll be plenty of time to carve up Devore's wife later on. And in the immediate future, I don't think Mattie's going to have any problem observing the bailshut condition. She just got her job back, remember?"

"Yeah, the white buffalo crops dead and the whole herd scatters!" Joan exulted. "Look at em go! And the new multi-millionaire goes back to filing books and making out overdue notices! Okay, Tuesday we'll just party. "Good."

"Party 'til we puke."

"Well, maybe us older folks will just party until we're mildly nauseated, would that be all right?"

"Sure. I've already called Romeo Bissnette, and he's going to bring George Kennedy, the private detective who got all that hilarious shit on Durgin. Bissnette says Kennedy's a scream when he gets a drink or two in him. I thought I'd bring some steaks from Peter Lager's, did I tell you that?"

"I don't believe you did."

"Best steaks in the world. Michael, do you realize what's happened to that young woman? *Eighty million dollars!*"

"She'll be able to replace Scoutie."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Will you come in tomorrow night or on Tuesday?"

Tuesday morning around ten, into Castle County Airport. New England Air. Mike: "are you all right? You sound odd."

"I'm all right. I'm where I'm supposed to be. I think."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I had wandered out onto the deck. In the distance thunder rumbled. It was hotter than hell, not a breath of breeze stirring. The sunset was taking on a bakful afterglow. The sky in the west looked like the white of a bloodshot eye.

"I don't know," I said, "but I have an idea the situation will clarify itself. I'll meet you at the airport."

"Okay," he said, and then, in a hushed, almost reverential voice: "Eighty million motherfucking American dollars."

"It's a whole lotta' effect," I agreed, and wished him a good night.

and give you proper notice. I never stopped work for anyone without giving notice, not even that old drunk Mr. Croyden—but I have to. Please understand."

Did Bill find out I called you? I swear to God, Brenda, I never said a word.

No. I haven't spoken to him, nor he to me. I just can't come back to Sara Loughs. I had a bad dream last night. A terrible dream. I dreamed that—something's mad at me. If I come back, I could have an accident. It would *look* like an accident, at least, but—it wouldn't be.

That's all, Mrs. M. I wanted to say. You're not past the age where you want to be protected. It's all good. And look, the old Lough-Loughs isn't it?

But, of course I could say no such thing. What was going on in my house was no campfire story. I knew it, and she knew I did.

Brenda, if I've caused you any trouble, I'm truly sorry.

Go away, Mr. Noonan. Mike. Go back to Derry and stay for awhile. It's the best thing you could do."

I heard the letters sliding on the fridge and turned. This time I actually saw the circle of fruits and vegetables form. It stayed open at the top long enough for four letters to slide inside. Then a little plastic lemon plugged the hole and completed the circle.

yats

the letters sat, then swapped themselves around, making

stay

Then both the circle and the letters broke up.

Mike *felt*. Mrs. M. was crying. Royce's funeral is tomorrow. Everyone in the IR who matters—the old timers—will be there.

Yes—the *arse*, they would. The old ones, the bags of bones who knew what they knew and kept it to themselves. Except some of them had talked to my wife. Royce himself had talked to her. Now he was dead. So was she.

It would be best if you were gone. You could take that young woman with you, maybe. Her and her little girl."

BAG OF BONES

But I said I'd swim down and find out. I thought I was in the TR at the time, but I was standing on the beach when that weird Lee Astor storm was coming. A violent storm. A tornado even a tornado.

Brenda, thanks for calling me. An hour or better, even. I'll call it a leave of absence, shall we?

I'll do whatever you want. Well, I don't like to think about it, but I said."

Yes. In the meantime, I don't think I can do anything more, is that right?"

No," she said, sounding shocked. Then Brenda took a deep breath. Yvette Denise Brooks at the garage. And Arthur. Well, that Baddy Jelison and all the others. They know how low Mr. Newman is so sorry for you and your wife. Your son was. I'm so sorry. Then she was gone.

I took the phone in my hand for a long time. Then I woke up from a dream. I put it down, crossed the room and took a long look at the wall. I threw it in the trash and went straight to bed, not remembering that W. F. Harvey story. August Heat, the summer with the line. The heat was enough to drive me mad.

I'm not a good swimmer when people are at the edge of the water. It's my first shore-to-float-to-shore. My first swim was really a first. I was agitated because I kept expecting something to happen. I kept thinking and grab me. The drowned boy in the water. The second swim was a first. By the third I was relishing the increased risks of the third swim. The coolness of the water rushing past me. He was through that area. I pulled myself up the float's ladder and collapsed. I was a little better than I had been. My swim water was a little better. I was more in Friday night. I was still a little zone. I was still a little zone. I was experiencing a glorious sense of the sea. I was a little better. I was a little better. I felt when Mrs. M. told me she was going to stay away. She would do me back for this visit. I was a little better. In the meantime, it was probably best she stay away.

Something's mad at me. I could have an accident.

Yes, indeed. She might cut herself. She might fall down a flight of celestial stairs. She might even have a stroke running across a hot parking lot.

I sat up and looked at Sara on her hill, the deck jutting out over the drop, the railroad ties descending. I'd only been out of the water for a few minutes, but already the day's sticky heat was folding over me, stealing my rest. The water was still as a mirror. I could see the house reflected in it, and in the reflection Sara's windows became watchful eyes.

I thought that the focus of all the phenomena—the epicenter—was very likely on The Street between the real Sara and its drowned image. *That's where it happens*, Devore had said. And the old timers? Most of them probably knew what I knew—that Royce Merrill had been murdered. And wasn't it possible—wasn't it *likely*—that what had killed him might come among them as they sat in the pews or gathered afterward around his grave? That it might steal some of their force, their guilt, their memories, their *TR-ness*—to help it finish the job?

I was very glad that John was going to be at the trailer tomorrow, and Romeo Bissnette, and George Kennedy, who was so amusing when he got a drink or two in him. Glad it was going to be more than just me with Mattie and Ki when the old folks got together to give Royce Merrill his send-off. I no longer cared very much about what had happened to Sara and the Red Tops, or even about what was haunting my house. What I wanted was to get through tomorrow, and for Mattie and Ki to get through tomorrow. We ate before the rain started and then let the predicted thunderstorms come. I thought that, if we could ride them out, our lives and futures might clarify with the weather.

Is that right? I asked. I expected no answer—talking out loud was a habit I had picked up since returning here—but somewhere in the woods east of the house, an owl hooted. Just once, as if to say it *was* right, get through tomorrow and things will clarify. The hoot almost brought something else to mind, some association that was ultimately too gaazy to grasp. I tried once or twice, but the only thing I could come up with was the title of a wonderful old novel—*I Had a One Called My Name*.

I poked forward off the float and into the water, grasping my knees against my chest like a kid doing a cannonball. I stayed under as long as I could, until the air in my lungs started to feel like some hot bottled

RAG (I) RONES

stroke, and stroke risk factors, and water resources
and related environmental issues, and stroke care
stroke for shore

I walked out stiff-legged, with a sore, aching, painful, swollen
right knee. The Street I stood there for, and the things I saw, I never
will. I know where the bridge is, and the bridge is still there, but
I missed that white curve as I had on Friday evening, and the
red water I was sure I saw the day I had seen it. I was sure
from looking at the water, and the water was the same, but
I was in with the taste of the lake, and the water was
I was in it, but there was nothing. No, I was in it, and I was
Boston Post came, no taste of the lake in my mouth.

[illegible]

When I got back into the house and went to the kitchen, the front of the refrigerator was bare and clean. Every fruit and vegetable was gone. I was even thinner than I had been, probably would have if there had been more time. But by that Monday morning time was almost up.

I dressed, then called Marie. We talked about the experience, about how excited he was, about how nervous Marie was. I then went back to work on Friday. It was strange that the kids had not thought to let. But in an odd, wonderful way he was so much closer to his wife than he was to her sister. We talked about the matter, and I quickly ascertained that she didn't believe in the reality of it. Lance used to say his father was sick not that he was slow, just that he was staying too long and then hurt himself. She said, "It's not as if he's coming back. I won't starve and neither will Ki."

* But if there really *are* big bucks

On 21st June 1994, several years after the crash, I am, crazy'

'Nah. By the way, what's going on with Ki's fridgefator people? Are they writing any new stuff?"

That is the weirdest thing," she said. "They're gone."

"The fridgefator people?"

I don't know about them, but the magnetic letters you gave her sure are. When I asked Ki what she did with them, she started crying and said Almagoo-salum took them. She said she ate them in the middle of the night, while everyone was sleeping, for a snack.

"Allama-tu-bo-salum?"

Almagoo-salum. Mattie said, sounding wearily amused. "Another little leechy from her grandfather. It's a corruption of the Micmac word for boogeyman, or demon. I looked it up at the library. Kyra had a good many night-mares about demons and wendigos and the almagoo-salum late last winter and this spring."

"What a sweet old grandpa he was," I said sentimentally.

Right, a real pip. She was miserable over losing the letters, I barely got her calmed down before her role to VB's came. Ki wants to know if you'd come to Final Exercises on Friday afternoon, by the way. She and her friend Billy Targoon are going to flannelboard the story of baby Moses."

I wouldn't miss it," I said, "but of course I did. We all did."

Any idea where her letters might have gone, Mike?

'No.'

'Yours are still okay?"

Mine are fine, but of course mine don't spell anything," I said, looking at the empty door of my own fridgefator. There was sweat on my forehead, I could feel it creeping down into my eyebrows, use oil. "Did you . . . I don't know . . . sense anything?"

"You mean did I maybe hear the evil alpaadot-thief as he said through the window?"

"You know what I mean."

I suppose so. A pause. "I thought I heard something in the night, okay? About three this morning, actually. I got up and went into the hall. Nothing was there. But . . . you know how quiet it's been lately?"

'Yes.

"I hope we get to eat before the thunderstorms. They're supposed to be bad."

"I'm sure we will."

And are you still thinking? I only ask because I dreamed of you when I finally fell asleep again. I dreamed of you kissing me."

"I'm still thinking," I said. "Thinking hard."

But in fact I don't remember thinking about anything very hard that day. What I remember is drifting further and further into that zone I've explained so badly. Near dusk I went for a long walk in spite of the heat—a full the way out to where Lane Forty-two joins the highway. Coming back I stopped on the edge of Tidwell's Meadow, watching the light fade out of the sky and listening to thunder rumble somewhere over New Hampshire. Once more there was that sense of how thin reality was—not just here but everywhere; now it was stretched like skin over the blood and tissue of a body we can never know clearly in this life. I looked at trees and saw worms. I looked at bushes and saw faces. Ghosts, Martie had said. Ghosts with cold breath.

Time was also thin—it seemed to me. Kyra and I had really been at the Fryeburg Fair—some version of it, anyway—we had really visited the year 2000. And at the foot of the meadow the Red Tops were almost there now, as they once had been, in their neat little cabins. I could almost hear the sound of their guitars, the murmur of their voices and laughter. I could almost see the gleam of their lanterns and smell their beer and pork frying. *Sitting at the foot of the meadow, one of her songs went, 'Well I ain't your honey like I used to be.'*

Something rattled in the underbrush to my left. I turned that way, expecting to see Sara step out of the woods wearing Matt's cross and Matt's white sneakers. In this gloom, they would seem almost to float by themselves, until she got close to me.

There was no one there, of course. It had undoubtedly been nothing but Chuck the Woodchuck headed home after a hard day at the office, but I no longer wanted to see out here, watching as the light drained out of the day and the mist came up from the ground. I turned for home.

* * *

nets, her sections of Afghan. The green rag rug on the floor. The pot of pencils on the desk, pencils she had touched and used. I held one of them poised over a blank sheet of paper for a moment or two, but nothing happened. I had a sense of life in this room, and a sense of being watched . . . but not a sense of being *helped*.

I know some of it but not enough, I said. Of all the things I don't know, maybe the one that matters most is who wrote *help* her on the fridge. Was it you, Jo?

No answer.

I sat awhile longer, hoping against hope. I suppose, then got up, turned off the air conditioning, turned off the lights, and went back to the house, waking in soft bright stutters of unfocused lightning. I sat on the deck for a little while, watching the night. At some point I realized I'd taken the length of blue silk ribbon out of my pocket and was winding it nervously back and forth between my fingers, making harassed cat's cradles. Had it really come from the year 1906? The idea seemed perfectly crazy and perfectly sane at the same time. The night hung hot and hashed. I imagined Ed talks all over the TR, perhaps in Motion and Harlow too—laying out their funeral clothes for tomorrow. In the doublewide trailer on Wasp Hall Road, Ki was sitting on the floor, watching a videotape of *The Jungle Book*. Baloo and Mowgli were singing. The Bar, *Necessities*. Mattie was on the couch with her feet up, reading the new Mary Higgins Clark and singing along. Both were wearing shorty pajamas, Ki's pink, Mattie's white.

After a little while I lost my sense of them, it faded the way radio signals sometimes do late at night. I went into the north bedroom and crouched, and crawled onto the top sheet of my unmade bed. I fell asleep almost at once.

I woke in the middle of the night with someone running a hot finger up and down the middle of my back. I rolled over and when the lightning flashed, I saw there was a woman in bed with me. It was Sara Toddwell. She was grinning. There were no pupils in her eyes. Oh sugar, I'm almost back, she whispered in the dark. I had a sense of her reaching out for me again, but when the next flash of lightning came, that side of the bed was empty.

CHAPTER

24

Inspiration isn't always a matter of gliding smoothly, as it is when a refrigerator doors, and on Tuesdays I'm going to have to turn out a beaut. It came while I was staving and then I was at a moment more than remembering the door for the part. At work, the best inspiration came out of nowhere at all.

I hurried into the living room, not to tell a word with the
cream off my face with a towel as I went. I glanced briefly at the *English Staff* crossword collect only long enough to show a description of the place
where I'd gone first in an effort to — save — I was — here —
down ninety-two. Not an unreasonable start, yes — but at
English Staff have to do with. The *English Staff* parties I was — Mr
Paperback in Derry and of the thirty or so pages I had —
done all out but a dozen in Derry. The most even that I've seen
to show an interest in my Derry crossword — he said. The *English Staff*
book, on the other hand —

I snatched it off the dinner table. And I ate it. A whole southern slice. Costa County. Mexico. And when I was wakened as well as the Elk it was pretty clear. He had a two-

check the white pages to see if there *were* at least ninety-two. There were. The Y's and Z's finished up on page ninety-seven.

This was the answer. Had to be.

"I got it, didn't I?" I asked Bunter. "This is it."

Nothing. Not even a tinkle from the bell.

Fuck you—what does a statted moosehead know about a telephone book?"

Go down nineteen. I turned to page nineteen of the telephone book where the letter *F* was prominently showcased. I began to slip my finger down the first column and as it went, my excitement faded. The nineteenth name on page nineteen was Harold Fables. It meant nothing to me. There were also Feltons and Fenners, a Flkersham and several Finneys, half a dozen Flahertys and more Fosses than you could shake a stick at. The last name on page nineteen was Framingham. It also meant nothing to me, but

Framingham, Kenneth P.

I stared at that for a moment. A realization began to dawn. It had nothing to do with the refrigerator messages.

You're not seeing what you think you're seeing. I thought. *This is like when you buy a blue Buick—*

You see blue Buicks everywhere, I said. Practically got to kick em out of your way. Yeah, that's it. But my hands were shaking as I turned to page ninety-two.

Here were the *F*'s of Southern Castle County, along with a few *U*'s like Anton Ubeck and Catherine Udell just to round things out. I didn't bother checking the ninety-second entry on the page, the phone book wasn't the key to the magnetic crosspatches after all. It did, however, suggest something enormous. I closed the book, just held it in my hands for a moment (happy folks with blueberry cakes on the front cover), then opened it at random this time to the *M*'s. And once you knew what you were looking for, it jumped right out at you.

All those *K*'s.

Oh, there were Stevens and Johns and Martans, there was Meserve, Grant, Messier, V., and Jaynouse, T. And yet again and again I saw the initial *K* where people had exercised the right not to list their first name

County. You see what I'm saying, don't you? When you see a whole column of Bowies on page twelve, you know that those folks have been around long enough to relax and really spread those Bowie genes.

There were a few K initials and K-names among the Parettis and the Smoanacks, but only a few. The heavy concentrations were all attached to families that had been here long enough to absorb the atmosphere. To breathe it to the full. Except it wasn't radiation, exactly, it

I suddenly imagined a black headstone taller than the tallest tree on the lake—a monolith which cast its shadow over half of Castle County. This picture was so clear and so terrible that I covered my eyes, dropping the phone book on the table. I backed away from it, shuddering. Hiding my eyes actually seemed to enhance the image further—a grave marker so enormous it blotted out the sun. TR-50 lay at its foot like a funeral bouquet. Sara Tidwell's son had drowned in Dark Secret Lake—or *been* drowned in it. But she had marked his passing. Memorialized it. I wondered if anyone else in town had ever noticed what I just had. I didn't suppose it was a likelihood likely—when you open a telephone book you're looking for a specific name in most cases, not reading whole pages line by line. I wondered if I had noticed—if she'd known that almost every longtime family in this part of the world had, in one way or another, named at least one child after Sara Tidwell's dead son.

Jo wasn't stupid. I thought she probably had.

I returned to the bathroom, relathered, started again from scratch. When I finished, I went back to the phone and picked it up. I poked in three numbers, then stopped, looking out at the lake. Mattie and K. were up and in the kitchen, both of them wearing aprons, both of them in a fine froth of excitement. There was going to be a party! They would wear pretty new summer clothes—and there would be music from Mattie's boombox CD player! K. was helping Mattie make biscuits for strawberry shortcake—and while the biscuits were baking they would make salads. If I called Mattie up and said *Pick a couple of big jobs and K. does it—helps a lot at Dark Secret*, Mattie would assume I was joking, then tell me to hurry up and finish getting dressed so I'd be at the airport when Jo's plane landed. If I pressed, she'd remind me that

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and, and . . . but it was not as if I was . . .
happy. More difficult, slow, and painful, even. I could have con-
tinued to press, she would just say no.

Because I was at the moment in a state of . . . I was . . .
who was really feeling it.

I returned the phone calls to Laraine, and . . . I was . . .
suddenly bear up. But that I'd been . . .
already feeling white under the stress of . . .
had been for the last week, more or less. But . . .
time to meet the plane. I had reserved this . . .
there. More in the spirit that was my . . .

I had not given me . . .
such meetings are hardly necessary. The . . .
sists of three hangars and . . .
tion—when the light's strong, and . . .
you can still see the shape of that wing . . .
nity is provided by Lasse Brock. Peter's . . .
days crisscrossed out on the Indian floor . . .
whenever a plane lands or takes off.

I popped my head into Peter's . . .
Boston was on time. He said it was . . .
meeting planned to . . .
night. Bad weather was common . . .
referred to as *bad weather*. I knew . . .
my nervous system that electricity . . .

I went out to the . . .
advertising. Corner's Market . . .
MENT. The sign was a silver button . . .
with sky. He . . .
weather was . . .
as best I could.

At ten past ten I . . .
some sort of . . .
the runway . . .

sengers—and John Storrow was the first one off. I grinned when I saw him. I had to grin. He was wearing a black tee-shirt with WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS printed across the front and a pair of knaki shorts which displayed a perfect set of city shins—white and bony. He was trying to manage both a Styrofoam cooler and a briefcase. I grabbed the cooler maybe four seconds before he dropped it—and tucked it under my arm.

"Mike!" he cried, lifting one hand palm out.

John? I returned in much the same spirit (*Mike* is the word that comes immediately to the crossword aficionado's mind), and slapped him five. His homely-handsome face split in a grin, and I felt a little stab of guilt. Mattie had expressed no preference for John—quite the opposite, in fact—and he really hadn't solved any of her problems. Devore had done that by topping himself before John had so much as a chance to get started on her behalf. Yet still I felt that nasty little poke.

Come on," he said. "Let's get out of this heat. You have air conditioning in your car, I presume?"

"Absolutely."

What about a cassette player? You got one of those? If you do, I'll play you something that'll make you chortle."

I don't think I've ever heard that word actually used in conversation, John."

The grin shone out again, and I notice I what a lot of freckles he had. Short. A lady's boy. Open grown up to serve at the bar. I'm a lawyer. I use words in conversation that haven't even been invented yet. "You have a tape-player?"

"Of course I do." I hefted the cooler. "Steaks?"

"You bet. Peter Luger's. They're—"

"—the best in the world. You told me."

As we went into the terminal, someone said: "Michael—"

It was Romeo Bissonette, the lawyer who had chaperoned me through my deposition. In one hand he held, box wrapped in blue paper and tied with a white ribbon. Beside him, just rising from one of the campy chairs, was a tall gay with a fringe of gray hair. He was wearing a brown suit, a blue shirt, and a string tie with a golf club on the clasp. He looked more like a farmer on a auction day than the sort of gay who'd be

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is a room where I get to work on my own. I have a desk and a chair, and I was the private driver. He helped me to get my hands with me. Good. But Mr. N. and I meet you. My wife is here every day. I have a car.

"Well thank her for me."

'I will have one of the first editions. If I can, I'll give it to my people at whatever cost. But I do hope she'll like it. I'll let you sign it for her at some point.'

I turned to Romeo. "Good to see you, Romeo."

Make it Romantic – to save! Give it a special touch. It's a box George and I labored with for this Wedding Anniversary something nice for helping a damsel in distress!

Kennedy, now 47, looks like a man who makes his living by the drink. The kind who might just take a whole lot of tips and cash out of a table, turn a table over on its back, and leave. I look at Kennedy and just gave the kind of shrug that means hey, don't ask *me*.

I pulled off the set a bow, stopped everything and said, "Stop it," holding the paper, then looked at I thought Robert Bresson would act after bowing Kennedy. No, there were no more.

There's nothing in life that's gonna get you out of this booga-booga, is there, guys?' I asked.

Absolutely not. Reminds me of a little boy who was

Well, I can do as good a sport as the next one. I took the package, opened the plain white box, saw a red, lumpy, cottony, fitted it out. I had been struggling all the way to get it out the smile cur, up and down my neck. Smelling with the same spirit as well, and I think I am very satisfied with it. I am

It was the oxygen mask. Deafening, it was a violent attack on The Street, the one reds tore from socks, as a child kept paled me trying to keep me. It felt as though I was back as sonnet and George Kennedy. I felt as though I was back as dead enemy and I was supposed to think it was *funny*—

Mike's Remnant asked, "What's Mike's story?" It was a joke—

I blinked and saw it wasn't an oxygen mask at all—how in God's name could I have been so stupid? For one thing, it was bigger than Devore's mask, for another, it was made of opaque rather than clear plastic. It was—

I gave a tentative chuckle. Rommie Bassonette looked tremendously relieved. So did Kennedy. John only looked puzzled.

Finally, I said, "Like a rubber crutch." I pulled out the little mike from inside the mask and let it dangle. It swung back and forth on its wire, reminding me of the waggy clock's tail.

"What the hell is it?" John asked.

Park Avenue lawyer, Rommie said to George, broadening his accent so it came out *Persack chetee kinnat*. "Ain't never seen one of these have ya, chummy? Nossir, cuss not." Then he reverted to normal speech, which was sort of a relief. I've lived in Maine my whole life, and for me the amusement value of baroque Yankee accents has worn pretty thin. It's a Stenomask. The stenog keeping the record at Mike's depo was wearing one. Mike kept looking at him—

It freaked me out, I said. "Old guy sitting in the corner and mambling into the Mask of Zorro."

"Gerry Bliss freaks a lot of people out," Kennedy said. He spoke in a low rumble. "He's the last one around here who wears em. He's got ten or eleven left in his mudroom. I know, because I bought that one from him."

"I hope he stuck it to you," I said.

"I thought it would make a nice memento," Rommie said, "but for a second there I thought I'd given you the box with the severed hand in it. I hate it when I mix up my gitt-boxes like that. What's the deal?"

It's been a long hot July, I said. "Put it down on that. I hang the Stenomask's strap over my finger, dangling it that way."

Mattie said to be there by eleven. John told us, "We're going to drink beer and throw the Frisbee around."

I can lie better than these things quite well, George Kennedy said.

Outside in the tiny parking lot George went to a dusty Altma, rummaged in the back, and came out with a battered copy of *The Red Sea Wolf*. "Erika made me bring this one. She has the newer ones, but this is her favorite. Sorry about how it looks—she's read it about six times."

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It's my favorite too. I saw when I was traveling and I like the book with my age. That was so true. I paid for it and I was improving at a smile. I bought it and I was happy. I wrote *For the Love of the Book* and I was happy. I was happy for sharing him, and thanks for reading. Mike Noonan

That was a long inscription for me, I said. I just look to *God* or *God/lat*, but I wanted to make up for the centuries. I saw it seen on my face when I spoke the first word, the first prayer. Was I was scribbling George, she said. If I was scribbling, how would

No, I said. Batter is current, not voltage. That's not what I said.
"Frieda won't like that."

"No. But there's always *Red-Shirt*."

We felt how you, Ronnie said, and that's what I'm hoping for the west. It was no louder than the thunder which had rung in our ears the last week, but this was not dry thunder. We all knew it and we all looked in that direction.

"Yeah. Just about barely."

I drove to the gate of the parking lot and got out to look around. When I did, I saw John looking at me nervously.

"What?"

"Matilda said you were writing that al-Buhari was 'a little bit of something'"

My *Childhood Friend* was just as lively as ever in that letter that we never be finished. I knew that this morning as well as I know that it was raining on the way. The boys in the document had to be sent to school to take it back. Asking why might not be such a good idea, as the answers might be unpleasant.

“Something I’m not sure just what I should do in the next few days,” he checked behind me and saw Rommie and George. “All right,” George said. “Little A-tima. America has become a country full of love and life.”

'What do you want, not listen to it, it's a kick in the ass. I just thing on car, I want to hear is you singing. But a show, it takes a Last Night.'

"Oh, it's better than that," he said. "Miles better."

He opened his briefcase, rooted through it, and came out with a plastic cassette box. The tape inside was marked 7-20-98—yesterday. "I love this," he said. He leaned forward, turned on the radio, then popped the cassette into the player.

I was hoping I'd already had my quota of nasty surprises for the morning, but I was wrong.

Sorry, I just had to get rid of another call," John said from my Chevy's speakers in his smoothest, most lawyerly voice. I'd have bet a million dollars that his tiny shins hadn't been showing when this tape was made.

There was a laugh, both smoky and grating. My stomach seized up at the sound of it. I remembered seeing her for the first time standing outside The Sunset Bar, wearing black shorts over a black tank-style swimsuit. Staring there and looking like a refugee from crash diet hell.

"You mean you had to turn on your tape recorder," she said, and now I remembered how the water had seemed to change color when she nailed me that really good one in the back of the head. From bright orange to dark seal. It had gone. And then I'd started drinking the lake. "That's okay. Tape anything you want."

John reached out suddenly and ejected the cassette. "You don't need to hear this," he said. "It's not substantive. I thought you'd get a kick out of her beating out . . . man, you look terrible. Do you want me to drive? You're white as a fucking sheet."

"I can drive," I said. "Go on, play it. Afterward I'll tell you about a little adventure I had Friday night . . . but you're going to keep it to your seat. They don't have to know . . . I wiped my thumb over my shoulder at the Art ma . . . and Mattie doesn't have to know. Especially Mattie."

He reached for the tape, then hesitated. "You're sure?"

You. It was just hearing her again out of the blue like that. The quality of her voice. Christ, the reproduction is good.

Nothing but the best for Avery McLean and Bernstein. We have very strict protocols about what we can tape, by the way. If you were wondering."

I wasn't. I imagine none of it's admissible. Litigation anyway is it?

"In certain rare cases a judge might let a tape in, but that's not why we

John: A tape I've shared with you before. It's a recording of me
I found it on him. I don't play it now, but the words I remember
"Play it."

He leaned forward and pushed the button.

John: "How is the desert, Ms. Whitmore?"

Whitmore: "Hot."

John: "Arrangements progressing nicely. I know, you know, it's
times like this can—"

Whitmore: "You know very little, because I like to know what
we cut the crap?"

John: "Consider it cut."

Whitmore: "Have you conveyed the conditions of Mr. Devore's
will to his daughter-in-law?"

John: "Yes ma'am."

Whitmore: "Her response?"

John: "I have none to give you now. I may have one for Mr. Devore's
will has been probated. But surely you know that such things
are rarely if ever accepted by the courts."

Whitmore: "Will it that little lady moves out the window? Is
won't we?"

John: "I suppose we will."

Whitmore: "When is the victory party?"

John: "Excuse me?"

Whitmore: "Oh please. I have sixty little happy birthday cards to
plus a boss to bury tomorrow. You're going up there to
brate with her and her daughter when they do. I don't care
she's invited the writer. Her fuck-buddy."

John turned to me quickly. "Do you remember the show she's
She's trying to hide it, but she can't. It's a real thing. I was
I barely heard him. I was in the zone with what she was saying
(the writer her fuck-buddy)

and what was said. What she was saying. She was saying
words. He just said, "she's going to be a real thing."

John: "I hardly think what I or Mattie's friends do is any of your business, Ms. Whitmore. May I respectfully suggest that you party with your friends and let Mattie Devore party with him—"

Whitmore: "Give him a message."

Me. She was talking about me. Then I realized it was even more personal than that—she was talking *to* me. Her body might be on the other side of the country, but her voice and spiteful spirit were right here in the car with us.

And Max Devore's will. Not the meaningless shit his lawyers had put down on paper but his *will*. The old bastard was as dead as Damocles, but yes, he was definitely still seeking custody.

John: "Give who a message, Ms. Whitmore?"

Whitmore: "Tell him he never answered Mr. Devore's question."

John: "What question is that?"

Does her cunt sink?

Whitmore: "Ask him. He'll know."

John: "If you mean Mike Newman, you can ask him yourself. You'll see him in Castle County Probate Court this fall."

Whitmore: "I hardly think so. Mr. Devore's will was made an I witnessed out here."

John: "Nevertheless, it will be probated in Maine, where he died. My heart is set on it. And when you leave Castle County the next time, Rogette, you will do so with your education in matters of the law considerably broadened."

For the first time she sounded angry, her voice rising to a reedy caw.

Whitmore: "If you think—"

John: "I don't think. I know. Goodbye, Ms. Whitmore."

Whitmore: "You might do well to stay away from—"

BAG OF BONES

There was a look on Liam's face when I told him that I had been to the doctor's. I had to tell him. I had to tell him that I had been to the doctor's. I had to tell him that I had been to the doctor's.

I am going to tell him that I have been to the doctor's. I am going to tell him that I have been to the doctor's. I am going to tell him that I have been to the doctor's.

Yes. It was what he wanted to hear. It was what he wanted to hear. It was what he wanted to hear. It was what he wanted to hear. It was what he wanted to hear.

What was the question? I was going to tell him that I had been to the doctor's. I was going to tell him that I had been to the doctor's. I was going to tell him that I had been to the doctor's.

"We've got eighteen miles to cover, lay it on me." I told him about Friday night. I didn't clutter it with the usual or psychic phenomena. There was just Michael Noonan, after a senseless walk along The Street. I had been standing by the tree, and I had been watching the car drop toward the main road. When it came up behind me, from the point where David had been with his wheelchair to the point where I had been, I had been stuck pretty much to the truth.

When I finished, John was at first silent. Then it was a moment of how to write a long one was an awkward one. Then it was a moment of how to write a long one was an awkward one.

"Well," I asked, "Comments? Questions?" "Lift your hair so I can see behind your ear."

I did as he asked, revealing a little. But I did not reveal anything. I did not reveal anything. I did not reveal anything. I did not reveal anything.

It was my turn to say nothing. 'Those two old fucks tried to drown you.' I said nothing.

"They tried to drown you for helping Mattie."

Now I *really* said nothing

"And you never reported it?"

I started to, I said, then realized I'd make myself look like a whiny little asshole. And a liar, most likely.

How much do you think Osgood might know?

About them trying to drown me? Nothing. He's just a messenger boy.

A little more of that unusual quiet from John. After a few seconds, if it be revealed out and touched the lump on the back of my head.

'Ow!'

'Sorry. A pause. Jesus. Then he went back to Warrington's and pulled the pin. Jesus. Maniac. I never would have played that tape if I'd known . . ."

It's all right. But don't even think of telling Mattie. I'm wearing my hair over my ear like that for a reason."

"Will you *ever* tell her, do you think?"

I might. Some day when he's been dead long enough so we can laugh about me swimming with my clothes on."

"That might be awhile," he said.

"Yeah. It might."

We drove in silence for a bit. I could sense John groping for a way to bring the day back to usual time, and loved him for it. He leaned forward, turned on the radio, and found something loud and nasty by Grand in Roses. We came to a young couple, we got fun and games.

"Party 'til we puke," he said. "Right?"

I grinned. It wasn't easy with the sound of the old woman's voice still lingering to me like light to me, but I managed. "If you insist," I said.

"I do," he said. "Most certainly."

"John, you're a good guy for a lawyer."

"And you're a good one for a writer."

This time the grin on my face felt more natural and I stayed on longer. We passed the market reaching 1A 90, and as we did the sun burned through the haze and flooded the day with light. It seemed like an omen, or better times ahead, and I looked into the west. There, back in the bright, I could see the thunderheads building up over the White Mountains.

CHAPTER

25

For men, I think, love is a thing formed out of lust and lust is an instrument. The instrument part women are very good at. They know they only think they understand. Very few men have sex with women who have any concept of what it really is or how to keep it going. Let's just say just as well for their sleep and peace of mind. And I don't talk about the lust of satyrs and rapists and incestists. I'm talking about the lust of shoe-clerks and high school principals.

Not to mention writers and lawyers.

We turned into Mutt's Liberate art gallery and I saw that my Chevy had never tasted shit. Joey, the kid who had been with Marie, came out on the top step. I saw several men at the door, but I could hear John sucking in his.

She was very likely the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life, as she stood there in her black and white short-sleeved, midy top. The shorts were a rust color and they were so tight, they were worth that plims short on a hot day or a cold. Her eyes were deep, strong brows across the shoulders and she had a smile that was just on. Her hair hung to her shoulders. She was smiling at me and

thought. *She means to look like the country club drink mom she dressed just as she is, and she shuts everyone else down.*

On Lordy John said. There was a kind of dismayed longing in his voice. "All that and a bag of chips."

Yeah. I said. Pat your eyes back in your head, big boy.

He made cupping motions with his hands as if doing just that. George, meanwhile, had pulled his Altima in next to us.

"Come on," I said, opening my door. "Time to party."

"I can't touch her, Mike," John said. "I'll melt."

"Come on, you goof."

Mattie came down the steps and past the pot with the tomato plant in it. Kai was behind her, dressed in an outfit similar to her mother's, only in a shade of dark green. She had the shys again. I saw, she kept one steady hand on Mattie's leg and one thumb in her mouth.

The gays are here! The gays are here! Mattie cried, laughing, and threw herself at my arms. She hugged me tight and kissed the corner of my mouth. I hugged her back and kissed her cheek. Then she moved on to John, read his shirt, patted her hands together in applause, and then hugged him. He hugged back pretty well, for a guy who was afraid he might melt. I thought, picking her up off her feet and swinging her around in a circle while she hung onto his neck and laughed.

Each lady, each lady, each lady. Joan chanted, then set her down on the cork soles of her white shoes.

Free lady, free lady, free lady, she chanted back. The new with rich. But to me, said my, she kissed him firmly on the mouth. His arms rose to slip around her, but she stepped back before they could catch hold. She turned to Rommie and George, who were standing side by side and looking like fellows who might want to explain all about the Mormon Church.

I took step forward, meaning to do the introductions, but John was taking care of that, and one of his arms managed to accomplish its mission after all. It circled her waist as he led her forward toward the men.

Meanwhile a little hand slipped into mine. I looked down and saw Kai looking up at me. Her face was grave and pale and every bit as beautiful as her mother's. Her blonde hair, freshly washed and shining, was held back with a velvet scrunchy.

BAG OF BONES

Crucially, the frequency of the word *be* is not significantly higher in the real text than in the generated text, and the frequency of the word *and* is not significantly lower in the real text than in the generated text. Moreover, the frequency of the word *the* is not significantly higher in the real text than in the generated text.

I picked her up and set her on her feet. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not here walking down the middle of the street." She kissed her forehead. "I was rather shy this morning. I was so nervous." "I know they did," I said. "I'll buy you some more

'Promise?' Doubtful dark blue eyes fixed on mine.

promise. And I'll tell you special words that I know lots of special words."

"How many?"

"A hundred and eighty."

Thunder rumbled in the west. It didn't stop. It just rumbled and increased somehow. K's eyes went in that direction. "I'm not going home," he said. "I'm scared, Mike."

'Scared? Of what?'

"Or I don't know. The lady in Matt's dress. I'm nervous. But she looked over my shoulder. Her eyes. Mmm. . . . All the actresses deliver the line *Not that I love you* in a different way. Not if you're Kyra. Kyra walked in the circle of my arms. I'm in

I landed her Mattie, Jean R. Prince, a Georgia slave who ran away from Mattie, who picked her up and took her to his plantation surveying her troops.

'Got the beer?' she asked me

Yessam. A case of Bacillus anthracis was observed. "Pest. 100
ade."

"Great Mr. Kennedy"

"George, ma'am."

George, then, Art, Eve, and Emma and I spent the rest of the day in Matt's Workshop, driving down to the lake. "Come on," she pointed to the store on Route 18, at about half past six, "and get some ice!"

"You bet."

⁴Mr Bissonette—"

• Romme •

"There's a little garden at the north end of the trailer. Rummie. Can you find a couple of good-looking lettuces?"

"I think I can handle that."

John let's get the meat into the fridge. As for you, Michael. She pointed to the barbecue. "The briquets are the self-lighting kind. Just drop a match and stand back. Do your duty."

"Aye, good lady," I said, and dropped to my knees in front of her. That finally got a giggle out of Ka.

Laughing, Mattie took my hand and pulled me back onto my feet. "Come on, Sir Galahad," she said. "It's going to rain. I want to be safe inside and too stuffed to jump when it does."

In the city, parties begin with greetings at the door, gathered-in coats, and those peculiar little air kisses (when, exactly, did *this* social oddity begin?). In the country, they begin with chores. You fetch, you carry, you hunt for stuff like barbecue tongs and oven mitts. The hostess drafts a couple of men to move the picnic table, then decides it was actually better where it was and asks them to put it back. And at some point you discover that you're having fun.

I picked briquets until they looked approximately like the pyramid on the bag, then touched a match to them. They blazed up satistically and I stood back, wiping my forearm across my forehead. Cool and clear might be coming, but it sure wasn't in helping distance yet. The sun had burned through and the day had gone from dull to dazzling, yet in the west black-satin thunderheads continued to stack up. It was as if night had burst a blood vessel in the sky over there.

"Mike?"

I looked around at Kyra. "What, honey?"

"Will you take care of me?"

"Yes," I said with no hesitation at all.

For a moment something about my response—perhaps only the quickness of it—seemed to trouble her. Then she smiled. "Okay," she said. "Look, here comes the ice-man!"

George was back from the store. He parked and got out. I walked over with Kyra, she holding my hand and swinging it possessively back

BAG OF BONDS

and North Rumpire are within 100 m of the shore [100 m is the distance from the shore to the 100 m depth contour]. North Rumpire was the only reef flat that was not exposed on the common Saturday night.

George opened the Atlanta store to find a note pinned to the door. The store was closed. "I was in Saigon," it said. "I'll be back in a few days. That seemed a little bit like a long time to be stuck in a foreign country. I'll get the money through the mail-slog."

They'd closed for Rocco's marriage to her, so they'd had to go to the most salubrious country at the height of the season, so she'd had to go, and fell into the ground. It was a first for her, and she'd been a little sort of creepy.

'Can I carry some ice?' Kyra asked.

I guess hard yet soft are ours. — George Santayana, *Life of Reason*

a five-pound bag of ice into KJ's outstretched arms.

Frizzicate. Kyra said giggling. She began waving her hands. The trailer where Mattie was just coming out. John was watching her regarding her with the eyes of a cat who had just seen a mouse. 'Mattie is frizzicating!'

"I took the other bag. I know the address, so I'll just keep a padlock on it."

"I am friends with most padlocks," George said.

"Oh, I see."

[illegible]

I looked down and saw K. looking up. Don't talk out loud, she said.

I glanced at her, then flipped her the coin. 'Ok, my sister's on, sweetheart. Toss it to your mom. Let's see if you can.'

She smiled back, turned, and made a quick escape to her mother—the kiss was so hot that Marley almost fainted. Whatever else Kyrr Devere might have been, she was a first-class pleasure maker.

More precisely, the first two columns of \mathbf{W}_1 are \mathbf{w}_1 and \mathbf{w}_2 , the last two columns of \mathbf{W}_1 are \mathbf{w}_3 and \mathbf{w}_4 .

brown suitcoat flaring and caught it deftly behind his back. Mattie laughed and applauded, the hem of her top flirring with her navel.

"Showoff!" John called from the steps.

Jealousy is such an ugly emotion. George said to Rommie Bismette and flipped him the Frisbee. Rommie floated it back to John, but it went wide and bonked off the side of the trailer. As John hurried down the steps to get it, Mattie turned to me. "My boombox is on the coffee table in the living room, along with a stack of CDs. Most of them are pretty old, but at least it's music. Will you bring them out?"

"Sure."

I went inside, where it was hot in spite of three strategically placed fans working overtime. I looked at the grim, mass-produced furniture, and at Mattie's rather noble effort to impart some character—the van Gogh print that shouldn't have looked at home in a trailer kitchenette out did, Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* over the sofa, the tie-dyed curtains that would have made Jock laugh. There was a bravery here that made me sad for her and furious at Max Devore all over again. Dead or not, I wanted to kick his ass.

I went into the living room and saw the new Mary Higgins Clark on the sofa end table with a bookmark sticking out of it. Lying beside it in a heap were a couple of little girl hair ribbons—something about them looked familiar to me, although I couldn't remember ever having seen Kim wearing them. I stood there a moment longer, frowning, then grabbed the boombox and CDs and went back outside. Hey guys, I said. "Let's rock."

I was okay until she danced. I don't know if it matters to you, but it does to me. I was okay until she danced. After that I was lost.

We took the Frisbee around to the rear of the house partly so we wouldn't piss off any funeral-bound townies with our rowdiness and good cheer, mostly because Mattie's back yard was a good place to play—level ground and low grass. After a couple of missed catches, Mattie kicked off her party-shoes, dashed barefoot into the house, and came back in her sneakers. After that she was a lot better.

We threw the Frisbee, yelled insults at each other, drank beer, laughed

BAG OF BONIS

But Kew saw him, other of his friends, such as people
for kid, three of 'em, with gas. R. . . .
on the train's back step, and it spoke to me
y notes music. U2, I don't know, it's like a, G. . . . H. . . .
Hick of Seagulls. Ah, Lahr, the Bag's M. . . .
and the News. It seemed to me that I knew it, but I didn't.

We sweated and sprinted for the front door. We were in the
ing, and all legs flash at a blister, but the legs were not
At one point Romie Bisson threw his hands up, and I
spelling out of his pockets, and I saw a small, dark, round
tears rolled from his eyes. Ki ran over, and plucked the small
up. John stopped laughing in a hurry. One of his hands, however,
with shining, wounded eyes, was slung by his side, and the other
back inside his body.

Kyra Deane? Matt cried, looking at John, as if he said:

"I tagged my own quartermack," Ki said proudly.

John smiled feebly at her and staggered to his feet. "You're so
You did. And the other, all fifteen yards for a push-up."

Are you okay, man? George asked. He looked at her, and his
voice was grinning.

I'm fine," John said, and I spun him the first time. It was all
across the yard. "Go on, throw. Let's see whatcha got."

The thunder rambled under, but the old sky was dark, and
of us, the sky over it, remained a harmless, calm. . . .
and crickets hummed in the grass. There was a faint, shimmering
barbecue, and it was as if we were in a place, in John's New York
The first bee still flew, red, against the green of the grass, and I
I don't the sky. I was still in a last, but everything was so close, and
are in a last, all over the world, and I don't know, and I don't
perhaps don't meet. But she danced, and I was, and I was.

It was an old John Henley song, or a new one, or a new one.

Oh God, I love this one," Matt cried. The song was a new one,
caught it, dropped it, stepped on it, and it was a new one, and
a night club stage, and began to shake. She was with us, and
neck, and then, in a new, and I don't know, and I don't know.

ing with the toes of her sneakers on the Frisbee. She danced without moving. She danced as they say in that song—like a wave on the ocean.

*"The government bugged the men's room
in the local disco lounge,
And all she wants to do is dance, dance . . .
To keep the boys from selling
all the weapons they can scrounge,
And all she wants to do, all she wants to do is dance."*

Women are sexy when they dance—naturally sexy—but that wasn't what I reacted to, or now I reacted. The lust I was coping with, but this was more than lust, and not copable. It was something that sacked the wind out of me and left me feeling utterly at her mercy. In that moment she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, not a pretty woman in skirts and a middy top dancing in place on a Frisbee, but Venus revealed. She was everything I had missed during the last four years, when I'd been so badly off I didn't know I was missing anything. She robbed me of any last defenses I might have had. The age difference didn't matter. If I looked to people like my tongue was hanging out even when my mouth was shut, then so be it. If I lost my dignity, my pride, my sense of self, then so be it. Four years on my own had taught me there are worse things to lose.

How long did she stand there, dancing? I don't know. Probably not long, not even a minute, and then she realized we were looking at her, rap—because to some degree they all saw what I saw and felt what I felt. For that minute, or however long it was, I don't think any of us used much oxygen.

She stepped off the Frisbee, laughing and blushing at the same time, confused but not really uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just—I love that song."

"All she wants to do is dance," Rommie said.

Yes, sometimes that's all she wants. Mattie said, and blushed harder than ever. "Excuse me, I have to use the facility." She tossed me the Frisbee and then dashed for the trailer.

TAG OF ZONES

Statistical significance was assessed using the Fisher's exact test. A P value of ≤ 0.05 was considered significant. The χ^2 test was used to assess the association between the variables. The χ^2 test was used to assess the association between the variables. The χ^2 test was used to assess the association between the variables.

Thunder rumbled. This time it *did* sound closer.

• $\frac{1}{h} = \frac{1}{h_1} + \frac{1}{h_2} + \frac{1}{h_3} + \dots + \frac{1}{h_n}$ (A 13-10) $W = \frac{1}{h}$

time we got going on those steaks if we're going to eat outside. Want to help me?"

"Sure."

"I will, too," John said.

"We walked back to the trailer I'd seen George and Kyra to play toss. Kyra was asking George if he had a good idea of how to do it. In the kitchen, Mattie was standing beside the stove, stirring something in a pot on a platter. "Thank God for days like this," I said. "I've got to get up and go along on one of these parties where I can see the most beautiful things I ever saw."

You're the most self-deceiving I've ever met. I've said I'm really sincere, but the sad thing is, I've never been so sincere. I made a trip to Paris to see a couple of friends, and on her beauty when she has a couple days, she's not really, she doesn't turn the windmill somehow.

"How are you at barbecuing meat?" he asked me. "Tell the truth, because these are way too good to mess up."

"I can hold my own."

[illegible]

"My pleasure"

George and Kiki have never sold their first car, a 1965 Ford Mustang, now sitting in lawn-chairs like a couple of old cronies at their London home. George was to me Kiki's wit, his stories, his wit. And Kiki was the Real Bad Gang on Lisbon Street in 1993.

$$Log_{\varepsilon}^n = \log_{\varepsilon} \left(\frac{1}{\varepsilon} \right)^n$$

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Mr. Kennedy has caught lots of crooked criminals," Kyra said. "He caught the Real Bad Gang and put them in Supermax."

"Yes," I said. "Mr. Kennedy also won an Academy Award for acting in a movie called *Cool Hand Luke*."

"That's absolutely correct," George said. He raised his right hand and crossed the two fingers. "Me and Paul Newman. Just like that."

"We have this puttetta sauce," Ki said gravely, and that got John laughing again. It didn't hit me the same way, but laughter is catching, just watching Joan was enough to break me up after a few seconds. We were now like a couple of fools as we slapped the steaks on the grill. It's a wonder we didn't burn our hands off.

"Why are they laughing?" Ki asked George.

"Because they're foolish men with little tiny brains," George said. "Newtsten, Ki. I got them all except for the Human Headcase. He jumped into his car and I jumped into mine. The details of that chase are nothing for a little girl to hear."

George regaled her with them anyway while John and I stood grinning at each other across Matt's barbecue. "This is great, isn't it?" John said, and I nodded.

Mattie came out with corn wrapped in aluminum foil, followed by Rummie, who had a large steel bowl clasped in his arms and negotiated the steps carefully, trying to peer over the top of the bowl as he made his way down them.

We sat at the picnic table. George and Rummie on one side. John and I flanking Mattie on the other. Ki sat at the head, perched on a stack of old magazines in a lawn chair. Mattie tied a dish towel around her neck, an indignity Ki submitted to only because (a) she was wearing new clothes, and (b) a dish towel wasn't babyish, at least technically speaking.

We ate the best salad, steak (and John was right, it really was the best I'd ever had), roasted corn on the cob, strawberry shortcake for dessert. By the time we'd gotten around to the shortcake, the rounder heads were noticeably closer and there was a hot, sticky breeze blowing around the yard.

Mattie, I'd never eat a meal as good as this one again. I won't be surprised. Rummie said, "Thanks ever so much for having me."

BAG OF BONIS

I think I should have a little something to say to my hand on the side of my suitcase. It's a little squeezed. Thank you. If I say a few words, I guess I'll be right on time this last week. So I should let go. I should squeeze, and let go. "But that's over."

'Look at the baby,' George said, amused.

Kir had stamped back, a her hair, erect, was long, and glazing eyes. Most of her hair, a few inches, were tied in a clump against her cheeks. There was a line of sweat on her nose and a single yellow keratinous string, hanging from her nose.

I threw the Fishes and Usan tires, & resented his lack of important, declamatory tone. "I tired."

Mattie started to get up. I put my hand in her arm. "Wait." She nodded, smiling. "If you want."

I picked Kyra up and carried her around the steps. I coughed and snot bled again, along with bile that stained red, soot that stung like dog shit. I looked up at the encroaching clouds and as I did my eyes itched and burned. It was an old blue car heading west on West Hill Road toward the lake. The only reason I noticed it was that it was beating a drum of tires stapled bumper-stickers from the Village Gate. TO N E K Y N O T FOR FINGER.

I carried Ki up the steps and through the door to her room. "I wouldn't bump her head," she said in her sleep. There was a sadness in her voice that called me. It was as if she knew I was doing the impossible. "Take care of me," I told Mr. Sato. I told Mr. Sato,

I take care of you. I said and kissed that sexy face. I was in her eyes again, "Don't worry, Ki, go to sleep."

I carried her to her room and put her to bed. Her eyes were swollen and she coughed out. I wiped the cream of her nose and wiped the corn kernel out of her chin. I gazed at my wife and saw that she was crying. They would be gathering at Grace Baptist with the Bledsoes, now wearing a gray tie. Boddy Johnson had left on Thursday and would be back on church with some other men who were staying at the Bledsoes.

I turned Matt's was in the drama. "Miss, stay in the class, please."

I went to her. There was no cloth between her waist and my hands this time. Her skin was warm, and as silky as her daughter's. She looked up at me, her lips parted. Her hips pressed forward, and when she felt what was hard down there, she pressed harder against it.

"Mike," she said again.

I closed my eyes. I felt like someone who has just come to the doorway of a brightly lit room full of people laughing and talking. And dancing. Because sometimes that's all we want to do.

I want to do it. I thought. That's what I want to do, do I want to do. Let me do what I want. Let me—

I realized I was saying it aloud, whispering it rapidly into her ear as I held her with my hands going up and down her back, my fingertips ridging her spine, touching her shoulderblades, then coming around in front to cup her small breasts.

Yes, she said. What we both want. Yes. That's fine.

Slowly, she reached up with her thumbs and wiped the wet places from under my eyes. I drew back from her. "The key—"

She smiled a little. "You know where it is."

"I'll come tonight."

"Good."

I've been . . . I had to clear my throat. I looked at Kyra, who was deeply asleep. I've been lonely. I don't think I knew it, but I have been.

'Me too. And I knew it for both of us. Kiss, please."

I kissed her. I think our tongues touched, but I'm not sure. What I remember most clearly is the *feeling* of her. She was like a dream delightfully spinning in my arms.

Hey! John called from outside, and we sprang apart. "You guys want to give us a little help? It's gonna rain!"

Thanks for finally making up your mind—she said to me in a low voice. She turned and hurried back up the doorwider's narrow corridor. The next time she spoke to me, I don't think she knew who she was talking to, or where she was. The next time she spoke to me, she was dying.

Don't wake the baby. I heard her tell Joan, and his response. "Oh, sorry, sorry."

BAG OF BONES

[illegible][illegible]

I looked down at myself in a small mirror, a large window. I remember thinking there was nothing so sinister-looking as a very excited man and knew I had this same thought before I entered a dream. I left the bathroom, checked on Kara, gave her the green key, took it fast as up—and then went down the hall. That part reached the living room when gunfire erupted. I never could tell the sound with thunder. There was a moment when my mind totally dropped the idea of backfires—some kids heard—and then I knew what I had been expecting something to happen—but not a gunfight with ghosts rather than gunfire. A fatal lapse.

It was the rap $\Delta p_{\text{cyl}} = \rho_{\text{cyl}} \Delta v_{\text{cyl}}^2$. For a bullet, the weapon was Glock, nine millimeter, as it turned out. Matteo screamed, but didn't know when that froze my blood. I heard him cry out in pain at the Glock's kick as it swung. Down, down! For Jesus' sake of Christ.

Something hit the trailer, like a large sphere of air, a rushing punching wind running from west to east. Something splattered in front of my eyes. I heard it. There was an instant of silence, a sound like a snapping guitar string. On the street, a car, a silver bowl one of them had just brought in shattered.

I ran for the color and nearly dove to lower the net. I took 8 steps. I saw the butterfly and turned with my wings out. I saw some patches of the same front yard as yesterday. I saw a new bird.

sitting with his legs outstretched, looking stupidly down at his ankle, which was soaked with blood. Mattie was on her hands and knees by the barbecue with her hair hanging in her face. It was as if she meant to sweep up the hot coals before they could cause some real trouble. John staggered toward me, holding out a hand. The arm above it was soaked with blood.

And I saw the car I'd seen before—the nondescript sedan with the joke sticker on it. It had gone up the road—the men inside making that first pass to check us out—then turned around and come back. The shooter was still leaning out the front passenger window. I could see the stubby smoking weapon in his hands. It had a wire stock. His features were a blue blank broken only by huge gaping eye sockets—a ski mask.

Overhead, thunder gave a long, awakening roar.

George Kennedy was walking toward the car, not hurrying, kicking hot spiled coals out of his way as he went, not bothering about the dark-red stain that was spreading on the right thigh of his pants, reaching behind himself, not hurrying even when the shooter pulled back in and shouted, "Go, go, go," at the driver, who was also wearing a blue mask. George not hurrying, no, not hurrying a bit, and even before I saw the pistol in his hand, I knew why he had never taken off his absurd Pa Kettle suit jacket, why he had even played Frisbee in it.

The blue car, it turned out to be a 1987 Ford registered to Mrs. Sonia Belvedere of Auburn. He reported stolen the day before had pulled over onto the shoulder and had never really stopped rolling. Now it accelerated, spewing dry brown dust out from under its rear tires, fishtailing, knocking Mattie's RFD box off its post and sending it flying into the road.

George still didn't hurry. He brought his hands together, holding his gun with his right and steadying with his left. He squeezed off five deliberate shots. The first two went into the trunk. I saw the holes appear. The third blew in the back window of the departing Ford, and I heard someone shout in pain. The fourth went I don't know where. The fifth blew the left rear tire. The Ford veered to that side. The driver almost brought it back, then lost it completely. The car plunged into the ditch twenty yards below Mattie's trailer and rolled over on its side. There was a *crash*, and the rear end was engulfed in flames. One of

BAG OF BONDS

gling to get out through the passenger window.

"Ki... get Ki... away..." A hoarse, whispering voice

Mattie was crawling with grief, crying, and she was so sad she could not eat, but her mother was not concerned, except that from her own experience she knew that a child who did not eat and sleep should be taken to a doctor. So she called a doctor for her, and he said that the child was suffering from a cold, and that she should be given some medicine. So she gave her some medicine, and she was better, and she was happy again.

"K1 . . . Mike, get K1 . . .

I know that people are scared of the S. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 85

Matteo, it's a rough, I said. Down at the other station, I said, at the far end of the zone, I was in the cross-section, but I was alone. The most common view was that this is the only place where you can see the things that I had seen. Matteo said that's not true.

"Ki . . . get K1 . . . don't let them . . .

"They won't hurt her, Mattie, I promise."

She slid against me, slipping as I stumbled to my feet, my arms outstretched, holding her bloody hair steady. I staggered, my legs giving out. I saw her shorts and top flying, one after the other, as she sped from the car, as she thrashed and paled. Then, as if by magic, there was a great roar, as if as the Ford's gas tank exploded. Black smoke billowed out, and a great Thunderer, a long, long, long, as if the sky were crying.

Yeah? I'll give you noise

Say Mattie's a right Moxie! Well, yes, I am, but—
God's sake say she's—"

He dropped to his knees beside me, his eyes staring at the snowed-out fire whites. He reached for the neck of my shirt, tore down my collar, half my shirt, and his fingers pressed against my

and fell on his side next to Mattie. A curd of white goo bubbled from one corner of his mouth. Twelve feet away, near the overturned barbeque, Rammie was trying to get on his feet, his teeth clenched in pain. George was standing in the middle of Wasp Hill Road, reloading his gun from a pouch he'd apparently had in his coat pocket and watching as the shooter worked to get clear of the overturned car before it was ignited. The entire right leg of George's pants was red now. *He may win, but he'll never wear that suit again*, I thought.

I held Mattie. I put my face down to hers, put my mouth to the ear that was still there and said, "Kyra's okay. She's sleeping. She's fine, I promise."

Mattie seemed to understand. She stopped straining against me and collapsed to the grass, trembling all over. "Ki . . . Ki . . ." This was the last of her talking on earth. One of her hands reached out blindly, groped at a tuft of grass, and yanked it out.

Over here, I heard George saying, "Get over here, motherfucker, don't you even *think* about turning your back on me."

"How bad is she?" Rammie asked, noobling over. His face was as white as paper. And before I could reply, "Oh Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and lat the night of our death. Blessed be the fruit of my womb Jesus. On Mary born without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee. Oh no, oh Mike, no." He began again, this time lapsing into Lewiston street French, what the old folks call *La Parle*.

"Quit it," I said, and he did. It was as if he had only been waiting to be told. "Go inside and check on Kyra. Can you?"

Yes. He started toward the trailer, holding his leg and wincing, clenching. With each fall, he gave a high yip of pain, but somehow he kept going. I could smell burning tufts of grass. I could smell electric rain on a summer wind. And under my hands I could feel the tight spin of the circle, the def slowing down as she went.

I came over, over, held her in my arms, and rocked her back and forth. At Grace Baptist the minister was now reading Psalm 139 for Royce. "If I say Surely the darkness shall cover me, even the night shall be light." The minister was reading, and the Martians were listening. I rocked her back and forth in my arms under the black raiderheads. I

CHAPTER

26

After that I was mostly in the zone. I came out a few times—when that scratched-out scrap of genealogy fell from inside one of my old stone books, for instance—but those interludes were brief. In a way it was like my dream of Mattie, Jo, and Sara; in a way it was like the terrible fever I'd had as a child when I'd almost died of the measles; mostly it was like nothing but itself. It was just the zone. I was feeling it. I wish to God I hadn't been.

George came over carrying the man in the blue mask ahead of him. George was limping now, and badly. I could smell hot oil and gasoline and burning tires. "Is she dead?" George asked. "Mattie?"

"Yes."

"John?"

"Don't know," I said, and then John twitched and groaned. He was alive, but there was a lot of blood.

"Mike, listen," George began, but before he could say more, a terrible squeal screaming began from the burning car in the ditch. It was the Juvet. He was cooking in there. The shooter started to turn that way and George raised his gun. "Move and I'll kill you."

BAG OF BONDS

You can't let him... like that...
mask "You couldn't let a dog die like that."

He said, "crushy" Georges. "You said that your mother had crushes on women, not just men." He said, "that's true, but my mother was as white as the spot of white on a red nose." "A red nose?" Keynote. The shoulder made it clear that he was not going to get up higher. The next person to speak said, "because I won't. Guaranteed. Now take that mask off."

"No."

back the hammer of his revolver.

The shooter said Jesus Christ and killed two more. He shot George Beerman. Not much surprise there. Instead of another driver give one more shot to me with a rifle. He took a few seconds. Smoke rose in back hills. More one or two.

Mike goes inside and in speaking to the press, which George Kennedy said, "I can hold him in the future, but I have a fear I'm dealing with a steel pipe. Look at stepping out so I can hold Houdini."

Footman stood where he was looking from Kennedy's room at the street. Kennedy again. Then he looked down at his watch. Six ways were eerily deserted. Or perhaps it wasn't so. Kennedy's car had been in the storms had been well received. The carists and seminarists were all under cover. As for the locals...

The locals were a sort of strange. That was at least how I felt. The minister was speaking about Raye Murray, a little school teacher who had been traitful—a man who'd deserted his country in 1940 and gone to the old timers were all listening to him. They were sitting around the fire, they had once gathered around the sick, burned or the folks who were ailing and listened to prizefights on the radio.

Bill Deary was holding Yvette's wrist so tight, his knuckles were white. He was hating her, and she was screaming at him to let go. She told him to hold onto her. Why?

Me: 'George's got a weapon. He's a killer. He's dangerous. This guy is dangerous.'

"Let me go, Footman said. "You'd better, don't you think?"

"In your wettest dreams, motherfucker," George said.

I got up, went past the pot with the key underneath, went up the cement-block steps. Lightning exploded across the sky, followed by a bellow of thunder.

Inside, Rommie was sitting in a chair at the kitchen table. His face was even whiter than George's. "Kid's okay," he said, forcing the words.

"But she looks like waking up. . . . I can't walk anymore. My ankle's totally fucked."

I moved for the telephone.

"Don't bother," Rammie said. His voice was harsh and trembling. "Tried it. Dead. Storm must already have hit some of the other towns. Killed some of the equipment. Christ, I never had anything hurt like this in my life."

I went to the drawers in the kitchen and began yanking them open one by one, looking for strapping tape, looking for clothesline, looking for any damned thing. If Kennedy passed out from blood-loss while I was in here, the other George would take his gun, kill him, and then kill John as he lay unconscious on the smoldering grass. With them taken care of, he'd come in here and shoot Rammie and me. He'd finish with Kyra.

"No he won't," I said. "He'll leave her alive."

And that might be even worse.

Silverware in the first drawer. Sandwich bags, garbage bags, and nearly banded stacks of grocery-store coupons in the second. Oven mitts and potholders in the third—

"Mike, where's my Mattie?"

I turned as guilty as a man who has been caught mixing illegal drugs. Kyra stood at the living-room end of the hall with her hair falling around her sleep-flushed cheeks and her scrawny hung-over one wrist as a bracelet. Her eyes were wide and panicky. It wasn't the shots that had awakened her, probably not even her mother's scream. I had awakened her. My thoughts had awakened her.

In the instant I realized it I tried to shield them somehow, but I was too late. She had read me about Devore well enough to tell me not to think about sad stuff, and now she read what had happened to her mother before I could keep her out of my mind.

No shit, I muttered, and checked the remaining drawers. No tape, no rope. Not even a lousy set of handcuffs, and in most well-equipped kitchens you can count on finding three or four. Then I had an idea and looked in the cabinet under the sink. When I went back out, poor George was swaying on his feet and Footman was looking at him with a kind of predatory concentration.

"Did you get some tape?" George Kennedy asked.

No, something better, I said. Tell me, Footman, who actually paid you? Devore or Whitmore? Or don't you know?"

"Fuck you," he said.

I had my right hand behind my back. Now I pointed down the hall with my left one and endeavored to look surprised. "What the hell's Osgood doing? Tell him to go away!"

Footman looked in that direction—it was instinctive—and I hit him in the back of the head with the Craftsman hammer I'd found in the toolbox under Matt's sink. The sound was horrible, the spray of blood erupting from the flying hair was horrible, but worst of all was the feeling of the skull giving way—a spongy collapse that came right up the hand and into my fingers. He went down like a sandbag, and I dropped the hammer, gagging.

Okay, George said. A little ugly, but probably the best thing you could have done under—under the—

He didn't go down like Footman—it was slower and more controlled, almost graceful—but he was just as out. I picked up the revolver, looked at it, then threw it into the woods across the road. A gun was nothing for me to have right now; it could only get me into more trouble.

A couple of other men had also left the chairs, a cartful of ladies in black dresses and veils as well. I had to hurry on even faster. I unbuttoned George's pants and pulled them down. The bullet which had taken him in the leg had torn into his thigh, but the wound looked as if it was clotting. John's copper arm was a different story—it was still pumping out blood in frightening quantities. I yanked his belt free and cinched it around his arm as tight as I could. Then I slapped him across the face. His eyes opened and stared at me with a weary lack of recognition.

Open your mouth, John! He only stared at me. I leaned down until,

black et nim—the light gray fur was now dark-gray with dust—but if the toy would calm her, I wanted her to have it. This was no time to worry about dirt and germs.

"I'll give you Strickland if you promise to close your eyes and not open them until I tell you. Will you promise?"

"I promise," she said. She was trembling in my arms, and great globular tears—the kind you expect to see in fairy-tale books, never in real life—rose in her eyes and went spilling down her cheeks. I could smell burning grass and charred beefsteak. For one terrible moment I thought I was going to vomit, and then I got it under control.

Ki closed her eyes. Two more tears fell from them and onto my arm. They were hot. She held out one hand, groping. I went down the steps, got the dog, then hesitated. First the rabbits, now the dog. The rabbits were probably okay, but it seemed wrong to give her the dog and let her bring it along. It seemed wrong but . . .

Leaving her, the UFO voice whispered: You still need to worry about it because it's gray. The stuffed toy in your dream was black.

I didn't know exactly what the voice was talking about and had no time to care. I put the stuffed dog in Kyra's open hand. She held it up to her face and kissed the dusty fur, her eyes still closed.

"Maybe Stricken can make Mummy better, Mike. Stricken a magic dog. "Just keep your eyes closed. Don't open them until I say

She put her face against my neck. I carried her across the yard and to my car that way. I put her on the passenger side of the front seat. She lay down with her arms over her head, and the curly stuffed dog clatched in one pudgy hand. I told her to stay just like that, lying down on the seat. She made no outward sign that she heard me, but I knew that she did.

We had to hurry because the old timers were coming. The old timers wanted this business over, wanted this river to run into the sea. And there was only one place we could go, only one place where we might be safe, and that was Salt Loughs. But there was something I had to do first.

I kept a blanket in the trunk, old but clean. I took it out, walked across the yard, and shook it down over Mattie Devore. The hump it made as it settled around her was pitifully slight. I looked around and saw Jean staring at me. His eyes were glassy with shock, but I thought

BAG OF BONES

looked like a junkie preparing to shoot up

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‘Gödel’

I didn't answer. There was something in the posture of the Kennedy's pause. Now I'd string Bassett's face into a smile, a nervous smile, but muzzling him. Now I'd say he'd just taken a leak. The jerk would smile back at me, and I'd say, "I'm sorry, but my car stunk, and now I don't know what to do." So I'd say, "I begu'd steak." My stomach clenched again.

I ran to the Chevy, dropped behind the wheel and lurched forward on my way. I took one more look at the monster before I drove off. The force knocked over next to the truck with the light of the headlights was lying down its side and its door standing open. I was a little dazed, but my good elbow, the end of the belt still hanging down with the keys attached, with uncomprehending eyes. Lightning flashed across the sky and I tried to shield my eyes from it, although by the time my hand was up the flash had gone and the day was as dark as late dusk.

'Stay down, Ki,' I said. 'Just like you are.'

I can't hear you, she said in a voice so full of tears that I could barely make out the words. I sat down again. Still not

"Okay," I said. "Good."

I drove past the burning house and lowered the hood of the car when I stopped at the rusty bullet-pocked stop sign. I looked into the car's side pickup truck's parcel on the shoulder. I saw a small, dark, boxy car on the side. Three men crowded together in the car, waving me. The man in the passenger window was Buddy Jones, a local teen and a friend of mine. Very slowly and deliberately, I raised my right hand, palm facing the car, my finger. None of them responded, and the rusty pickup's motor died. The pickup began to roll slowly toward me.

I turned it onto OS according to Serial number and it works.

Two miles from where I had left the two stragglers (1100) and saw a pair of
wings west to the lake, resting on a tall pine tree. The bird was a male.

one could still make out faded letters reading DONCASTER LARRY. As we approached it, the whole eastern side of the sky lit up in a purple-white blaster. I cried out, and the Chevy's horn hunked—by itself, I'm almost positive. A thorn of lightning grew from the bottom of that light-blaster and struck the barn. For a moment it was still completely there, glowing like something radioactive, and then it spewed itself in all directions. I have never seen anything even remotely like it outside of a movie theater. The thunderclap which followed was like a bombshell. Kyra screamed and slid into the floor on the passenger side of the car with her hands clapped to her ears. She still clutched the little stuffed dog in one of them.

A minute later I topped Sugar Ridge Lane Forty-two splits left from the highway at the bottom of the ridge's north slope. From the top I could see a wide swath of TR—woods and fields and barns and farms, even a darkening gleam from the lake. The sky was as black as coal, dust flashing almost constantly with internal lightnings. The air had a clear orange glow. Every breath I took tasted like the snavings in a tinderbox. The topography beyond the ridge stood out with a surreal clarity I cannot forget. That sense of mystery swarmed my heart and mind, that sense of the world as thin skin over unknowable bones and gears.

I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw that the pickup truck had been joined by two other cars, one with a V plate that means the vehicle is registered to a combat veteran of the armed services. When I slowed down, they slowed down. When I sped up, they sped up. I doubted they would follow us any farther once I turned onto Lane Forty-two, however.

'Ki? Are you okay?'

'Sleepun," she said from the footwell.

'Okay,' I said, and started down the hill.

I could just see the red bicycle reflectors marking my turn onto Forty-two when it began to hail—great big chunks of white ice that fell out of the sky, drummed on the roof like heavy fingers, and bounced off the hood. They began to slap in the gutter where my windshield wipers had

"What's happening?" Kyra cried.

'It's just hail,' I said. 'It can't hurt us.' This was barely out of my mouth when a hailstone the size of a small lemon struck my side of the windshield and then bounced high into the air again, leaving a white

cane. The writhing trees and peating rain made the entire world seem on the verge of wavering into insubstantial gruel. The driveway's slope had turned into a river, but I nosed the Chevy down it with no hesitation: we couldn't stay out here, if a big tree fell on the car, we'd be crushed like bugs in a Dixie cup.

I knew better than to use the brakes—the car would have heeled sideways and perhaps have been swept right down the slope toward the lake, rolling over and over as it went. Instead I dropped the transmission into low range, toed two notches into the emergency brake, and let the engine pull as down with the rain sheeting against the windshield and turning the big bulk of the house into a phantom. Incidentally, some of the lights were still shining like bathysphere portholes in nine feet of water. The generator was working, then—at least for the time being.

Lightning threw a lance across the lake, green-blue fire illumina-ting a black well of water with its surface lashed into surging whitecaps. One of the hundred-year-old pines which had stood to the left of the railroad tie steps now lay with half its length in the water. Somewhere behind us another tree went over with a vast crash. Kyra covered her ears.

It's all right, now, I said. We're here, we made it.

I turned off the engine and, like the lights. With it, at them I could see little—a most all the day had gone out of the day. I tried to open my door and at first couldn't. I pushed harder and it not only opened, it was ripped right out of my hand. I got out and in a brilliant stroke of lightning saw Kyra crawling across the seat toward me, her face white with panic, her eyes huge and brimming with terror. My door swung back and hit me in the ass hard enough to hurt. I ignored it, gathered Kyra to my arms, and turned with her. Cold rain drenched us both in an instant. Except it really wasn't like rain at all, it was like stepping under a waterfall.

My doggy? Kyra shrieked. Shriek or not, I could hardly hear her. I could see her face through, and her empty hands. Stricken. I drop Stricken?

I looked around and yes, there he was, floating down the macadam of the driveway and past the stoop. A little farther on, the rising water spilled off the piling and down the slope. If Strickland went with the flow, he'd probably end up in the woods somewhere. Or all the way down to the lake.

"Stricken!" Ki sobbed. "My *DOUGGY*!"

Slides by, nothing mattered to me, I was not
I chased down the driveway after a white Kitten
rain and wind and brilliant darkness, high rain, a
about me to this spot, the water had
fast for me to catch up

We had snagged it at the edge of the path, was a
waying wildly in the wind. They looked like old
pers at a revival meeting. Yet I had seen them
familiar. It was of course impossible that the same
sandflowers which had been growing up there
in my dream, and in the photograph. But I
back, and yet it was then I found I had
like the three wild sisters in *Wuthering*, three
searchlights. I had come back to Sara, Laura, I
returned to my dream and this time it had

"Stricken!" Ki, bending and thrashing in my arms, I
perry for safety. "Please, Mike, *please*!"

Thunder exploded vertical like a basket into
I dropped to one knee and started up the hill, striding
caught it, covered it with blankets, I
thunderclap sounded, this one, so
crazy, I said, bulwarp. I looked at the sandflowers
look back at me. *He had*...
resettling Ki in my arms as well as I could. I
haze. It wasn't easy, the water in the air was
tal, of melting barstools. A branch hit
where I'd knelt to pick up Stricken. There was
thus as a bigger branch struck the roof, the

I ran out the back steps, but, expecting the
to greet us, raising its baggy in its arms, it
there was no Slape. There was only the
there was no Slape. There was only the

Ki was watching the dog, I saw with a
its wetting, combined with the
had earned Stricken back. It was

Too late now. There was nowhere else to go, no other shelter from the storm. I opened the door and brought Kyra Devere inside Sara Laughs.

The central portion of Sara—the heart of the house—had stood for almost a hundred years and had seen its share of storms. The one that fell on the lakes region that July afternoon might have been the worst of them, but I knew as soon as we were inside, both of us gasping like people who have narrowly escaped drowning, that it would almost certainly withstand this one as well. The big walls were so thick it was almost like stepping into some sort of vault. The storm's crash and bash became a noisy drone punctuated by thunderclaps and the occasional loud thud of a branch falling on the roof. Somewhere—in the basement, I guess—a door had come loose and was clapping back and forth. It sounded like a starter's pistol. The kitchen window had been broken by the topple of a small tree. Its needle tips poked in over the stove, making shadows on the counter and the stove burners as it swayed. I thought of breaking it off and decided not to. At least it was plugging the hole.

I carried Kyra to the living room and we looked out at the lake, black water pricked up in surreal points under a black sky. Lightning flashed almost constantly, revealing a ring of woods that danced and swayed in a frenzy all around the lake. As solid as the house was, it was groaning deeply within itself as the wind pummelled it and tried to push it down the hill.

There was a soft, steady humming. Kyra lifted her head from my shoulder and looked around.

"You have a moose," she said.

"Yes, that's Banter."

"Does he bite?"

"No, no way he can't bite. He's like a—like a dog, I suppose."

"Why is his bell ringing?"

"He's glad we're here. He's glad we made it."

I saw her want to be happy, and then I saw her realizing that Mattie wasn't here to be happy with. I saw the idea that Mattie would never be here to be happy with glimmer in her mind—and felt her push it away. Over our heads something huge crashed down on the roof, the lights flickered, and Ki began to weep again.

scrambling against me with her plump little thighs. I hoisted her back up again, this time settling her against my hip, and she subsided.

"Who's here," she asked. She had begun to shiver. "Who's here, sides us?"

"I don't know."

"There's a boy," she said. "I saw him there." She pointed Strickland toward the sliding glass door which gave on the deck (all the chairs out there had been overturned and thrown into the corners, one of the set was missing, apparently blown right over the rail). "He was black like on that funny show me and Mattie watch. There are other black people, too. A lady in a big hat. A man in blue pants. The rest are hard to see. But they watch. They watch us. Don't you see them?"

"They can't hurt us."

"Are you sure? Are you, are you?"

I didn't answer.

I found a box of Swiss Miss hiding behind the flour cannister, tore open one of the packets, and dumped it into a cup. Thunder exploded overhead. Ki jumped in my arms and let out a long, miserable wail. I hugged her, kissed her cheek.

"Don't put me down, Mike, I scared."

"I won't put you down. You're my good girl."

I scared, I, of the boy and the blue-pants man and the lady. I think it's the lady who wore Mattie's dress. Are they goblins?"

"Yes."

Are they bad like the men who chased us at the fair? Are they?"

"I don't really know, Ki, and that's the truth."

"But we'll find out."

"Hub?"

"That's what you thought. But we'll find out."

Yes, I said. I guess that's what I was thinking. Something like that.

I took her down to the master bedroom while the water heated in the kettle, thinking there had to be something left of Josie's. I popped her into, but all of the drawers in Josie's bureau were empty. So was her side of the closet. I stood Ki on the big double bed where I had not so much as taken a nap's not coming back, took off her clothes, carried her into the

extreme and I wrapped her in a towel. She was shaking
 self-shaking and I hesitated for a moment before
 I said, "During this season, your body is now
 now beginning to bleed stuff from its seams."

I opened the neck of the towel and she was
 was looking for me to help her. I was looking for
 her to help her. I was looking for her to help her.
 portion of the box, then almost laughed at me. "What if I
 if I used I should keep her in a box, then almost
 my neck with I should the whole part of the box
 pink and white caplets. Then I used the box
 with cold water. While I was doing this I was
 room, then, which I offered the box, then I
 and I told myself that I was not a doctor, and I
 trees I offered the box, then I told myself that I

"Go on," I said. "It's medicine."

"What kind?" she asked. Her small hand was still poised over the lit-
 tle cluster of caplets.

"Sadness medicine," I said. "Can you swallow pills, K?"

"Sure. I taught myself when I was two."

She hesitated a moment longer, looking at me and I knew
 I think ascertaining that I was telling her something. I was
 What she saw or felt must have satisfied her. She was
 rivers and put them in her pocket, then I offered her
 with little bottle slips from the glass, then I told her
 "It takes awhile for them to work."

I imagined in my shirt drawer and I told her that I was
 tree that had strange. It was a small tree, then I told her
 knot in one side it made a small tree, then I told her
 her shoulders. It was almost cute.

I carry a comb in my back pocket. I took it out and I
 back from my forehead and I told her that I was
 together again. But there was something else. I was
 was connected in my mind with her. I told her that
 "It wasn't it?"

Mike? What cane? What cane are you thinking about it?"

Then it came to me. "A candy cane," I said. The kind with stripes. From my pocket I took the two white ribbons. Their red edges looked a most raw in the uncertain light. "Like these?" I tied her hair back in two little ponytails. Now she had her ribbons, she had her black dog the sunflowers had relocated a few feet north, but they were there. Everything was more or less the way it was supposed to be.

Thunder blasted somewhere close a tree fell, and the lights went out. After five seconds of dark gray shadows, they came on again. I carried Ki back to the kitchen, and when we passed the cellar door, something angled behind it. I heard it. Ki did, too. I could see it in her eyes.

"Take care of me," she said. "Take care of me cause I'm just a little guy. You promised."

"I will."

"I love you, Mike."

"I love you, too, Ki."

The kettle was humming. I filled the cup to the halfway mark with hot water, then topped it up with milk, cooling it off and making it richer. I took Ki over to the couch. As we passed the dining room table I glanced at the IBM typewriter and at the manuscript with the crossword-puzzle book lying on top of it. Those things looked vaguely foolish and somehow sad, like gadgets that never worked very well and now do not work at all.

Lightning lit up the entire sky, scouring the room with purple light. In that glare the laboring trees looked like screaming fingers, and as the light raced across the sliding glass door to the deck I saw a woman standing behind us, by the wood stove. She was indeed wearing a straw hat, with a brim the size of a cartwheel.

"What do you mean, the river is almost in the sea?" Ki asked.

I sat down and handed her the cup. "Drink that up."

"Why did the men hurt my mommy? Didn't they want her to have a good time?"

"I guess not," I said. I began to cry. I held her on my lap, wiping away the tears with the backs of my hands.

"You should have taken some sleeping pills, too," Ki said. She held out her

Nothing. She'd gone to the land of Noddy-Blinky. It probably helped that her afternoon nap had ended almost before it got started.

I picked her up and carried her down to the north bedroom, her feet bouncing limply in the air and the hem of the Harley shirt flapping around her knees. I put her on the bed and pulled the duvet up to her chin. Thunder boomed like artillery fire, but she didn't even stir. Exhaustion, grief, betrayal—they had taken her deep, taken her beyond ghosts and sorrow, and that was good.

I bent over and kissed her cheek, which had finally begun to cool. "I'll take care of you," I said. "I promised, and I will."

As if hearing me, Ki turned on her side, put the hand holding Stracka back under her jaw, and made a soft sighing sound. Her lashes were dark, set against her cheeks, in startling contrast to her light hair. Looking at her I felt myself swept by love, shaken by it the way one is shaken by a sickness.

Take care of me, I'm just a little guy.

"I will, Ki bird," I said.

I went into the bathroom and began filling the tub, as I had once filled it in my sleep. She would sleep through it all. I could get enough warm water before the generator quit entirely. I wished I had a bath-toy to give her in case she did wake up, something like Wilhelm the Spout-og-Walk, but she'd have her cog, and she probably wouldn't wake up, anyway. No freezing baptism under a handpump for Kyra. I was not cruel, and I was not crazy.

I had only disposable razors in the medicine cabinet—no good for the other job ahead of me. Not efficient enough. But one of the kitchen steak knives would do. If I filled the washbasin with water that was really hot, I wouldn't even feel it. A letter T on each wrist, the top bar drawn across the wrists.

For a moment I came out of the zone. A voice—my own speaking as some combination of Joan and Mattie—screamed *What are you thinking about? Oh, Mike, thank God, thank God, you think about it!*

Then the thunder boomed, the lights flickered, and the rain began to pour down again, driven by the wind. I went back into that place where everything was clear, my course indisputable. Let it აღწერ the sorrow,

BAG OF BONTS

[illegible]

I dropped the one knife and I took the water from the bucket. I was warm. Good. Even if the generator put out a few sparks. I was an idiot, a deep one. As I walked down the stairs, holding the knife, I thought about things I would never tell. I was stuck on my wrists in the hotter water of the gas. No one could hear me. It was interpreted by the people who would do anything to keep people with nasty minds and nasty assumptions. The days since the storm was over and the trees across the road cleared away. No matter how bath I would dry her in, but no leak in bed would stick to the bond. I sat across the room from her in the rocking chair, watching from windows. I was spread out, it was in my mind to be so. I pulled off my pants as I washed my face. I was in the shower.

Banger's bell was still ringing. Much louder now. It was getting on my nerves, and the kitchen that way, the floor even worse than the stairs. I decided to pull it down and silence it for good. As I stepped onto the stairs I held a strong gust that blew across the vestibule, that through the broken kitchen window, this was that warm subway air again. It blew the *Franklin* crossward to the other side of the vestibule, and the manuscript kept the loose pages from blowing. As I stepped in that direction, Banger's bell fell silent.

Avoiding gracelessness, Arthur Wellesley was a man who let his words do the dirty work. "We did not go to India to fight," he said, "but to blast off hot air from the Great Beyond—matter."

Handwritten: 1. The system is a... as the... of...

ced and the lights went out, plunging the room into gray shadow. I got one word in the clear.

Nineteen

I turned on my heels, making a nearly complete circle. I finished up looking across the shadowy room at the manuscript of *My Chickadee Friend*. Suddenly the light broke. Understanding arrived.

Not the crossword book. Not the phone book, either.
My book. My manuscript.

I crossed to it, vaguely aware that the water had stopped running into the tub in the north wing bathroom. When the generator died, the pump had quit. That was all right; it would be plenty deep enough already. And warm. I would give Kyra her bath, but first there was something I had to do. I had to go down nineteen—and after that I just might have to go down ninety-two. And I could. I had completed just over a hundred and twenty pages of manuscript, so I could. I grabbed the battery-powered lantern from the top of the cabinet where I still kept several hundred actual vinyl records, clicked it on, and set it on the table. It cast a white circle of radiance on the manuscript—in the gloom of that afternoon it was as bright as a spotlight.

On page nineteen of *My Chickadee Friend*, Tiff Taylor—the call girl who had reinvented herself as Regina Whiting—was sitting in her studio with Andy Drake, reliving the day that John Sanborn (the alias under which John Shackelford had been getting by) saved her three years of her daughter Karen. This is the passage I read as the thunder boomed and the rain assailed against the sliding door giving on the deck.

FRIEND, by Noonan/Pg. 19

over that way, I was sure of it," she said, "but when I couldn't see her anywhere, I went to look in the hot tub." She lit a cigarette. "What I saw made me feel like screaming, Andy—Karen was underwater. All that was out was her hand—the nails were turning purple. After that—I guess I

HAGGARD, R. G. 1983.

dived in, but I don't remember; I was zoned out. Everyt. . . .
 ran together in y. . . . The . . .
 shoved me aside and dove. His foot hit me in the
 throat and I . . .
 pan Karen's arm. I . . .
 damn shoulder, but he got her. He got her."

On God, I too get sleep and dead I was like you.

I know at least a half-dozen people who have found the manuscript. I could send them the Kaons, but I don't want to give away the crossword puzzle answer that is the first step in solving the sage which has been there a long time. I don't want to give it away.

ows under stad O

Then, following the work of [1], we can extend the definition of \mathcal{H} to

owls under studio

[illegible]

and tucked away. My imaginative wife. My brilliant water-brain.

Then $\|f\|_{\infty} \leq \|f\|_{\infty} + \|f\|_{\infty} = 2\|f\|_{\infty}$.
 Since $\|f\|_{\infty} \leq \|f\|_{\infty} + \|f\|_{\infty} = 2\|f\|_{\infty}$,
 we have $\|f\|_{\infty} \leq \|f\|_{\infty} + \|f\|_{\infty} = 2\|f\|_{\infty}$.

STEPHEN KING

"Christ, Jo," I whispered. "What did you find out?"

And why didn't you tell me?

But I thought I knew the answer to that. She hadn't told me because I was somehow like Max Devore, his great-grandfather and my own dad shut in the same pit. It didn't make any sense, but there it was. And she hadn't told her own brother, either. I took a weird kind of comfort from that.

I began to leaf through the manuscript, my skin crawling.

Andy Drake rarely frowned in Michael Noonan's *My Childhood Friend*. He scowled instead, because there's an owl in every scowl. Before coming to Florida, John Shackelford had been living in Studio City, California. Drake's first meeting with Regina Whiting occurred in her studio. Ray Garraty's last-known address was the Studio Apartments in Key Largo. Regina Whiting's best friend was Stetthe Underwood. Stetthe's husband was Twile Underwood—there was a good one, two for the price of one.

Owls under studio.

It was everywhere—on every page—just like the K-manes in the telephone book. A kind of monument, this one built. I was sure of it—not by Sam Towell but by Johann Arlen Noonan. My wife passing messages behind the guard's back, praying with all her considerable heart that I would see and understand.

On page ninety-two, Shackelford was talking to Drake in the prison visitors' room—sitting with his wrists between his knees. Looking down at the chain running between his ankles, refusing to make eye contact with Drake.

FRIEND, by Noonan/Pg. 92

only thing I got to say. Anything else, fuck, what good would it do? Life's a game, and I lost. You want me to tell you that I yanked some little kid out of the water, pulled her up, got her motor going again? I did, but not because I'm a hero or a saint . . . "

PAC OF BONTS

[illegible]

So had Jo helped me

I ruffled through the manuscript and saw that some words were written where sometimes placed so you could read two or three words on different lines one above the other. How foolishly, but true, it was me, and I had no printer, or I should have known just what to do about why.

I dropped the chains not back onto the floor but over the door and anchored it, which was just what I needed to slow the momentum of the cars and scattering them everywhere they could go. If the door had been ripped them to shreds, I'm sure that it would have.

 Δ is considered as large compared to Δ in Δ and Δ is

Wind blew around my face and I couldn't quite see. I was standing right in front of the wind machine, the tree retreating as I moved forward. I thought I was going to see the wolf outside the houses of the three little pigs.

I hung the antlers over my couch like trophies, and I cut them and clipped them to look sharp. I walked out into the woods. There was no one in the random world that I saw. I went back to put the six-paged kitchen window. She's sleeping. I know where she was still there, silently watching. "There's time."

I went out there and checked out the water. It's like 100° there. It's so hot, it's like a hot water heater. I went out there and checked out the water. It's like 100° there. It's so hot, it's like a hot water heater.

saw green faces, the faces of the dead. Devere's was there, and Royce's, and Son Tidwell's. Most of all I saw Sara's.

Everywhere Sara.

Go back! You don't belong with people who've . . . Go back! Finish the job! Do what you came for!

I don't *know* what I came for. I *saw*. And until I find out, I'm not doing *anything*."

The wind screamed as if in offense, and a huge branch spat off the pine standing to the right of the house. It fell on top of my Chevrolet in a spray of water, denting the roof before rolling off on my side.

Climbing my hands out here would be every bit as useful as King County commanding the tide to turn. This was her world, not mine, and only the edge of it, at that. Every step closer to The Street and the lake would bring me closer to that world's heart, where time was thin and spirits ruled. Oh dear God, what had happened to cause this?

The path to Jess' studio had turned into a creek. I got a dozen steps down it before a rock turned under my foot and I fell heavily on my side. Lightning zigged across the sky; there was the crack of another breaking branch, and then something was falling toward me. I put my hands up to shield my face and rolled to the right off the path. The branch was wed to the ground just behind me, and I tumbled halfway down a slope that was slick with soaked needles. At last I was able to pull myself to my feet. The branch on the path was even bigger than the one which had landed on the roof of the car. If it had struck me, it likely would have bashed in my skull.

Go back! A hissing, spiteful wind through the trees.

Back! The slabbering, guttural voice of the lake slamming into the rocks and the bank below The Street.

Mud! Mud! Mud! That was the very noise itself, groaning on its foundations. *Mud! Mud! Mud!* and let me stop this.

But Kyra *was* my business. Kyra was my daughter.

I picked up the lantern. The housing was cracked but the bulb glowed bright and steady—that was one for the home team. Bent over against the howling wind, hand raised to ward off more falling branches, I slipped and stumbled my way down the hill to my dead wife's studio.

CHAPTER

27

[illegible]

It was her face. Standing with her arms folded, she held it shut against me. How could I not know that? How could I not know? She was a fucking ghost!

I thought of the GAMM CONVENTION, which was held in the 1970s, where car aficionados would bring out their prized cars to show them off. I had two cars parked by the highway. The Old-timers were mostly 1950s cars, three or four other cars were new when I took a drive. A car with a windshield wipers flying back and forth in circles, cars with their headlights on cones through the downpour. They were like cars at a car sale. There was no one else there, but it felt like I was at a car sale. There was no one else there, but it felt like I was at a car sale. There was no one else there, but it felt like I was at a car sale.

She was off, working on the night shift, and I was home, alone.

with Devere—and me too, of course. Many of the manifestations I'd experienced since coming back had likely been created from my own psychic energy. It was amusing when you thought of it.

Or maybe "terrifying" was the word I was actually looking for.

'Jo, help me,' I said in the pouring rain. Lightning flashed, turning the torrents a bright and silver. 'If you ever loved me, help me now.'

I drew back and hit the door again. This time there was no resistance at all, and I went hurtling in, catching my shin on the jamb and falling to my knees. I held onto the lantern, though.

There was a moment of silence. In it I felt forces and presences gathering themselves. In that moment nothing seemed to move, although I told me, in the words Jo had liked to ramble—'with me or without me'—the rain continued to fall and the wind continued to howl, a merciless gardener pruning its way through the trees that were dead and almost dead, doing the work of ten greater years in one turbulent hour. Then the door slammed shut and it began. I saw everything in the glow of the flashlight, which I had turned on without even realizing it, but at first I didn't know exactly what I was seeing, other than the destruction by poltergeist of my wife's beloved crafts and treasures.

The framed armoire sprang from itself off the wall, and flew from one side of the studio to the other, the black oak frame breaking apart. The heads popped off the dolls poking out of the baby cradles like champagne corks at a party. The hanging light globe shattered, showering me with fragments of glass. A wind began to blow—a cold one—and was quickly joined and whirled into a cyclone by one which was warmer, almost hot. They filled past me as if in imitation of the larger storm outside.

The Sara Laughs head, in the bookcase, the one which appeared to be constructed of toothpicks and lollipop sticks, exploded in a cloud of wood splinters. The kayak paddle leaning against the wall rose into the air, ravelled furiously at nothing, then lanced itself at me like a spear. I threw myself flat on the green rag rug to avoid it, and felt bits of broken glass from the shattered light globe cut into the palm of my hand as I came down. I felt something else—as well—a ridge of something beneath the rug. The paddle hit the far wall hard enough to split into two pieces.

PAGE OF RUNS

[illegible]

The story of how I went from the howl of the howling
saw to howling was different from the others and I
thought it really was the best. The way I was sitting on the
back of the sleds was not with Dotsy's "I am not a
fish" and making me shape myself into a fish. I was
just sitting on the sleds and the sleds were going
down. For just a moment I had a sense of peace and
calm. I was in the middle of the world. And I was
just standing there, as if I had been there for a long time.
The wind was not so strong as I was used to. It was
just a gentle breeze that I was used to. I was used to
the night. It was so quiet. I was so happy. I was so
happy for presuming to interfere, and I was screaming.

No! I shouted getting into the hallway. I could hardly need noth room swinging the door open. The door was beat her away with it. Stopper. I tried to stop it. It was contained and there was some of the other things as some words verbs. I try to find a list of the other things as a syllable was to. None of them struck me as a list of things guided them away.

Then I tried to pass some of the air from my own lungs into the tube and made points with my hands so as to blow over the tube and then, in a line first, in a way that would produce the opposing currents of air.

[illegible]

—snatched itself across the room. It flew almost too fast to follow with the eye. Any one standing in front of it would have been smashed flat. There was a head-splitting shriek of protest and agony—Sara! It is time. I knew it was—and then the desk struck the wall, breaking through it and letting in the rain and the wind. The rollytop snapped loose of its slot and hung like a pointed tongue. All the drawers shot out. Spools of thread, skeins of yarn, little floral-tatna identification books and woods guides, thimbles, nitebooks, knitting needles, dried-up Magic Markers—Jo's cat's remains—K—might have called them. They flew everywhere like comets and bits of hair, cruelly scattered from a disinterested coffin.

"Stop it," I croaked. "Stop it, both of you. That's enough."

But there was no need to tell them. Except for the furious heat of the storm, I was alone in the ruins of my wife's studio. The battle was over. At least for the time being.

I knelt and disabled up the green rag rug, carefully folding into it as much of the shattered glass from the light as I could. Beneath it was a trap door giving on a triangular storage area created by the slope of the land as it dropped toward the lake. The ridge I'd felt was one of the trap's hinges. I had known about this area and had meant to check it for the owls. Then things began to happen and I'd forgotten.

There was a recessed ring in the trapdoor. I grabbed it, ready for more resistance, but it swung up easily. The smell that wafted up froze me in my tracks. Not lamp decay, at least not at first, but Red—Jo's favorite perfume. It hung around me for a moment and then it was gone. What remained was the smell of rain, roots, and wet earth. Not pleasant, but I had stood a lot worse down by the lake near that damned birch tree.

I sat on my right knee three steep steps. I could see a squat shape that turned out to be an old chest. I could vaguely remember Bill and Kenney Auster putting it under here back in 1990 or '91. There were steel boxes, filing cabinets, drawers, actually—wrapped in plastic and stacked up on pallets. Old records and papers. An eight-track tape, layer wrapped in a plastic bag. An old VCR next to it—in another one. And over in the corner—

I sat down, hung my legs over, and felt something touch the ankle I

BAG OF BONES

had turned out to be a false alarm. The boy was not dead, and the woman was not a kidnapper. Nor was the woman's husband a kidnapper. The boy was alive and well, and the woman was not a kidnapper. The drowned boy had been no more than eight

[illegible][illegible]

I went down, holding the lantern steady before my feet, trying to
rocked and seemed to reach upward.

The storage area in was not only in ruins, it had also been flooded with water. Pipes that had burst from the water main had run beneath these, and steel pipes that had burst had leaked enough to make even crawling quite steadily work. The storage area was entirely gone. What had remained it was just a ruin of some kind, and I knew, given the implications I knew it was that it was a sullen smell of ash and fire.

[illegible]

behind me, creeping in pursuit. When I got to the owls, I raised my head without thinking and thudded it against the insulation which ran beneath the studio floor. *Thump! thump! thump! thump!* I thought.

I hooked my fingers into the plastic which wrapped the owls and paled them toward me. I wanted to be out of here. The sensation of water running just beneath me was strange and unpleasant. So was the smell of fire, which seemed stronger now, in spite of the damp. Suppose the studio was burning? Suppose Sara had somehow set it alight? I'd roast down here even while the storm's muddy runoff was soaking my legs and belly.

One of the owls stood on a plastic base, I saw. The better to set him on your desk or stoop to scare the crows, my dear—but the base the other should have been attached to was missing. I backed toward the trapdoor, holding the lantern in one hand and dragging the plastic sack of owls in the other, wincing each time thunder cannonaded over my head. I'd only gotten a little way when the damp rope holding the plastic gave way. The owl missing its base tilted slowly toward me, its black-gold eyes staring raptly into my own.

A swirl of air. A faint, comforting whiff of Red perfume. I pulled the owl out by the harness tufts growing from its forehead and turned it upside down. Where it had once been attached to its plastic base there were now only two pegs with a narrow space between them. Inside them I was a small tin box that I recognized even before I reached into the owl's belly and cranked it out. I snuffed the lantern on its front, knowing what I'd see. JOSS SORROWS, written in old-fashioned gilt script. Sara had found the box in an antique bazaar somewhere.

I looked at it, my heart beating fast. Thunder boomed overhead. The trapdoor stood open, but I had forgotten about going up. I had forgotten about everything but the tin box I held in my hand, a box roughly the size of a cigar box but not quite as deep. I spread my hand over the cover and pulled it off.

There was a stew of folded papers lying on top of a pair of steno books, the wire-bound ones I keep around for notes and character lists. These had been rubber-banded together. On top of everything else was

The clippings about Sara and the Red-Tops didn't tell I only skimmed them anyway, but the overall tone shook me, just the same. I'd describe it as unfailing genial contempt. The Red-Tops were "our Southern Blackbirds" and "our rhythmic darkies." They were "full of dusky good nature." Sara herself was "a marvellous figure of a Negro woman with broad nose, full lips, and noble brow" who "fascinated men folk and women folk alike with her animal high spirits, flashing smile, and raucous laugh."

They were, God keep us and save us, reviews. Good ones. If you didn't mind being called full of dusky good nature.

I snuffed through them quickly, looking for anything about the circumstances under which "our Southern blackbirds" had left. I found nothing. What I found instead was a clipping from the *Cal.* marked July 28th, 1935, *W. A. R. 1935*. I thought: 1935. The headline read VETERAN GUIDE, CARETAKER, CANNOT SAVE DAUGHTER. According to the story, Fred Dean had been fighting the wildfires in the eastern part of the TR with two hundred other men when the wind had suddenly changed, menacing the north end of the lake, which had previously been considered safe. At that time a great many local people had kept fishing and hunting camps up there (this much I knew myself). The community had had a general store and, an actual name, Halo Bay. Fred's wife, Hilda, was there with the Dean twins, William and Carla, age three, while her husband was off eating smoke. A good many other wives and kids were in Halo Bay, as well.

The fires had come fast when the wind changed, the paper said. Like marching explosions. They jumped the only firebreak the men had left in that direction and headed for the far end of the lake. At Halo Bay there were no men to take charge, and apparently no women able or willing to do so. They panicked instead, racing to load their cars with children and camp possessions, clogging the one road out with their vehicles. Eventually one of the old cars or trucks broke down and as the fires roared closer, running through woods that hadn't seen rain since late April, the women who'd waited found their way cut blocked.

The volunteer firefighters came to the rescue at one, but when Fred Dean got to his wife, one of a party of women trying to pass a oaky

can jby arms and crying. I saw her as clearly as I saw my own face in the mirror each morning when I shaved. I saw she was about

Katie gets it — a purple and her hair is black instead of blonde. Her mother, the witch, says it will remain until it finally begins to grow out in the purple. By the time it does, I'll be a year, she will never see unless someone gets her out of bed. So I wear a white dress and red knee-sockings and she holds her arms out to me, calling Daddy, Daddy.

I don't believe we could have been so almost in organized that that every one
 kept in the main. I do wish that I realize and Fred Dean has just im-
 aged to me in Dade, in the but to him to me Daddy and he has
 to be a good of me at meeting as white silk dress and our baby for a be-
 fore but don't know at night to full and the lions beat their way in toward
 shore, seeming to weep in shrill lamentation

Daddy the fire is coming! $\text{c}_{\text{c}} \text{m}_{\text{c}} \text{d}_{\text{c}} \text{b}_{\text{c}} \text{u}_{\text{c}} \text{p}_{\text{c}} \text{h}_{\text{c}} \text{r}_{\text{c}} \text{m}_{\text{c}} \text{t}_{\text{c}} \text{t}_{\text{c}} \text{d}_{\text{c}} \text{m}_{\text{c}} \text{t}_{\text{c}}$

I know, be brave, *man*. We're gonna be all right, sugarplum, but you have to be brave.

[illegible]

Don't do it! I assure I know all this is for and my power to change. Let I
 show out my power by to change it out now. Fight it! For Christ's sake,
 fight it!

Daddy, who's that man? Let me see his card please. It's the *un-*
shingled roof of the Dean place catches fire

For the east and west, in a parting and in his part is a spasm of
the Hebertu, who, it is said, is the true way down deep be-
tween the earth and the sea. In the Bay where the Seven and the He-
bertu are, it is said, it is the only place where the Bay is not empty.

Conclusion: There is a contrary statement of the exerts if we do
 p → q, then ~q, that means if it rains. Or else, he feel me. Is that it?
 Do you feel a non-mathematical and draft model the best. One text feels like protest.

BAG OF BONDS

— I don't want to go in the water, Daddy —
— I know, but you must —

Then I'll go! But Gertie says that I'll be there in a
with purple and white silk dress, — not in that cheap
play-dress!

Daddy, why are we going in the water? *she asks*

To get away from the fire, sugarplum

Daddy, I can't swim!

You won't say, will you? — for I can't swim, —
— I know, but I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

He looks at her, but at last he says, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

— And Daddy says, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

He takes her up, and she says, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

Every day Daddy says, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you
— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

— I'll teach you, — I'll teach you, — I'll teach you

from it, I let it and it was dragging, just as I remember, trying to free
myself from it, I was saying, he told himself. It was an accident, just a terri-
ble accident, I took her out in the lake because it was the only place I
could take her, the only place left, and she panicked—she started to strug-
gle—she was all wet and all slippery and I lost my good hold on her and
then I lost any hold on her and then—

[illegible]

couldn't breathe—I was drowning.

I doubled over, opened my mouth, and this time a great spew of lake-water came out, soaking the plastic owl which lay on the pallet by my knees. I hugged the JOSSINGTONS box to my chest, not wanting the contents to get wet, and the movement triggered another retch. This time cold water poured from my nose as well as my mouth. I dragged in a deep breath, then coughed it out.

It's as good as dead, I said, but of course it's *not* the end, one way or the other. Because Kyra was last

I climbed up the steps to the stable and sat on the littered floor to get my breath. Outside, the thunder boomed and the rain fell, but I thought the storm had passed its peak of fury. Or maybe I only hoped.

I rested with my legs hanging down through the trap—there were no more gnats here than on my ankles, I don't know now I knew that but I did—and stripped off the rubber bands holding the steno notebooks together. I opened the first one, paged through it, and saw it was almost filled with Joe's handwriting and a number of folded typed sheets—Courier type, of course, single spaced—the trait of all those clandestine

simply confused, the way folks often get confused when they reach their eighties. Even a fellow like Devore, who had stayed mostly sharp, wouldn't have been exempt from the occasional nack in his edge. And he hadn't been that far off at that. Because, according to this little scratch of a chart, my great grandfather had had an older sister, Bridget. And Bridget had married—Benton Auster.

My finger dropped down a line to Harry Auster. Born of Benton and Bridget Noonan Auster in the year 1885.

'Christ Jesus,' I whispered. Kenny Auster's grandfather was my granduncle. And he was one of them. Whatever they did, Harry Auster was one of them. That's the connection."

I thought of Kyra with sudden sharp terror. She had been up at the house by herself for nearly an hour. How could I have been so stupid? Anyone could have come in while I was under the studio. Sara could have used anyone to—

I realized that it wasn't true. The murderers and the original victims had all been linked by blood, and now that blood had thinned—that river had almost reached the sea. There was Bill Dean, but he was staying well away from Sara Laughs. There was Kenny Auster, but Kenny had taken himself and his family off to Massachusetts. And K's closest blood relations—mother, father, grandfather—were all dead.

Only I was left. Only I was blood. Only I could do it. Unless—

I belted back up to the house as fast as I could, slipping and sliding my way along the soaked path. I desperate to make sure she was all right. I didn't think Sara could hurt Kyra herself, no matter how much of that old timer's blood she had to draw on—but what if I was wrong?

What if I was wrong?

woods burned all around her and her father. A part of me would be more than glad to pay the last installment on that old bill.

Dear God. I muttered, and wiped my face with a shaking hand. She knows so many tricks. And she's so fucking *strong*.

The bathroom door tried to swing shut against me before I could get through, but I pushed it open against barely any resistance. The medicine-cabinet door banged back, and the glass shattered against the wall. The stuff inside flew out at me, but it wasn't a very dangerous attack, this time: most of the missiles consisted of toothpaste tubes, toothbrushes, plastic bottles, and a few old Vicks VapoRubs. I am, very faint, I could hear her shouting in frustration as I yanked the plug at the bottom of the tub and let the water start gurgling out. There had been enough drowning on the TR for one century, by God. And yet, for a moment I felt an incredibly strong urge to put the plug back in while the water was still deep enough to do the job. Instead I tore it off its chain and tore it down the hall. The medicine-cabinet door clapped shut again and the rest of the glass fell out.

How many have you had? I asked her. How many besides Carla Dean and Kerry Auster and our Kia? Two? Three? Five? How many do you need before you can rest?

All of them! the answer snarled back. It wasn't just Sara's voice, either, it was my own, as well. She'd gotten into me, had snuck in by way of the basement like a burglar—and already I was thinking that even if the tub was empty and the water pump temporarily dead, there was always the lake.

All of them! the voice cried again. *All of them, sugar!*

Of course—only all of them would *do*. Until then there would be no rest for Sara Laughs.

"I'll help you to rest," I said. "That I promise."

The last of the water swirled away—but there was always the lake, always the lake if I changed my mind. I left the bathroom and looked in on her again. Sara hadn't moved, the sensation that Sara was in here with me had gone. Buster's bed was quiet—and yet I felt uneasy, unwilling to leave her alone. I had to, though, if I was to finish my work, and I would do well not to linger. County and State cops would be along eventually, storm or no storm, downed trees or no downed trees.

There was no pick, but I grabbed a spade that I picked up to a piece of gravedigging. Taken for what I thought would be the last time, I followed the course of my dream down to The Street. I didn't need Jo to show me the spot—the Green Lady had been pointing to it all along. Even had she not been, and even if Sara Tidwell did not still stink to the heavens, I think I would have known. I think I would have been led there by my own haunted heart.

There was a man standing between me and the place where the gray torches of rock guarded the path, and as I paused on the last railroad tie, he nailed me in a rasping voice that I knew all too well:

'Say there, whoremaster, where's your whore?'

He stood on The Street in the pouring rain, but his catters, catth green flannel pants, check-a-wool shirt—and his faded blue Union Army cap—were dry, because the rain was falling through him rather than on him. He looked solid but he was no more real than Sara herself. I reminded myself of this as I stepped down onto the path to face him, but my heart continued to speed up, thudding in my chest like a padded hammer.

He was dressed in Jared Devore's clothes, but this wasn't Jared Devore. This was Jared's great grandson Max, who had begun his career with an act of sled-theft and ended it in suicide—but not before arranging for the murder of his daughter-in-law, who had the temerity to refuse him what he had so dearly wanted.

I started to war him and he moved to the center of the path to block me. I could feel the cold baking off him. I am saying exactly what I mean, expressing what I remember as clearly as I can. I could feel the cold baking off him. And yes—it was Max Devore all right, but get up like a logger at a costume party and looking the way he must have around the time his son Lance was born. Old but male. The sort of man younger men might well look up to. And now, as if the thought had eddied them, I could see the rest shimmer into faint being behind him, standing in a line across the path. These were the ones who had been with Jared at the Brycroug Fair, and now I knew who some of them were. Fred Dean, of course, only nineteen years old in '01, the drowning

BAG OF BONES

It has caught it all over the years, says Auster. "I've remained me of myself was Hart. Auster had fathered the general's sister. He would have been the first of the first rise a faze out and came in to work in the wood with the enough to shut in the same as I did. I was a good wisdom. One of the others two to me. I said, 'I'm not at the time. I've seen that before. When I'm not at the view General. This young man was in the R. M. M. S. others I didn't know. Nor did I care to

"Don't even think about trying. Am I right, boys?"

They intimated growth, agreement, the sort of solid, reliable thing from an unpretentious day of dead targets, targets that were but their voices were distant, actually miles from the place. There was no substance to the man in June. Deven's stories, perhaps, were all that had been a man of character as strictly perhaps because he was so close to dead, but the others were all the more for a part of the day.

I started forward, moving into that kissing zone, and then I smelled him—the same inviolable odor as when I'd first met him. I'd met him here before.

"Where do you think you're going?" he cried.

For a constitutional, I said. And he went up to it. The Street was a place where good pups and evil dogs can walk side by side. You save yourself."

"You don't understand, Max. I tried to. You never saw. You were not of that world. That was our world."

I stopped, looking at him carefully. Time was so short, I needed to be done with this – but I had to know, and I thought David was going to tell me.

Make me understand, I said. Can we not make a year of his yearworld. I looked then men at the clock, at the stars, at the eyes behind him. I aze flesh and people and things. I was a little boy again.

It was all different than I discovered. When I was in the
 Newman, you might walk all the way to the Hill Block and
 a dozen people on Tw Street. After all, I did not know any

BAG OF BONDS

length so do the tennis girls

$$\begin{aligned}
1. \quad & \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } \text{if } x \in \mathcal{B} \text{ then } \text{if } x \in \mathcal{C} \text{ then } D \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{C} \text{ then } E \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{B} \text{ then } F \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } G \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } H \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } I \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } J \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } K \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } L \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } M \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } N \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } O \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } P \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } Q \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } R \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } S \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } T \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } U \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } V \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } W \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } X \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } Y \\
& \quad \text{if } x \in \mathcal{A} \text{ then } Z
\end{aligned}$$

Horn broken—watch for finger, *I think*

Beautiful! I'm going to describe it to you. Yes, I see it.
But what's your point?"

[illegible]

They go when a moment later, looking so very pale.
Harry Auster, for one—looked sick.

We taught her to play. Does she want to play,
nothing but a

18. $1/2, 1/3, 1/4, 1/5, \dots$

one at all. This side of the lake you have to walk through the bushes that are growing up wild and around the fallen trees—there'll be even more of 'em after this storm—and even a deadfall or two because nowadays the townfolk don't club together to keep it neat the way they used to. But in our time—' The woods were bigger then. Nornan's distances were farther to go, and neighboring meant something. Life itself, often enough. Back then this really *is* a street. Can you see?

I could. If I looked through the phantom shapes of Fred Dean and Harry Auster and the others, I could. They weren't just ghosts, they were shimmerglass windows on another age. I saw

[illegible]

It is not as profitable to use Wastewater in the industrial sector as in the agricultural sector.

happy one. All summer long he told them about their responsibility as men, their duty to keep the community pure and how they must see what others didn't and do what others wouldn't.

It was a Sunday afternoon in August, a time when traffic along The Street dropped steeply. Later on, by five or six, things would begin to pick up again, and from six to sunset the broad path along the lake would be thronged. But three in the afternoon was low tide. The Methodists were back in session over in Harlow for their afternoon Sing Service; at Warrington's the assembled company of vacationing flatlanders was sitting down to a noisy mid-afternoon Sabbath meal of roast chicken or ham. All over the township families were addressing their own Sunday dinners. Those who had already finished were snoozing through the heat of the day—in a hammock, wherever possible. Sara took this quiet time. Love lit a candle. She had spent a great deal of her life in carry-me-ways and in smoky gin joints, shouting out her songs in order to be heard above the voices of reduced, angry drunks, and while part of her loved the excitement and unpredictability of that life, part of her loved the serenity of this one, too. The peace of these walks. She wasn't getting any younger, after all, she had a kid who had now left part neutral, his babyhood behind him. On that particular Sunday she must have thought The Street almost too quiet. She walked a mile south from the meadow where she'd seen a sea—even Kato was gone by then, having stepped off to pick berries. It was as if the whole township were

in what Southern states the Eastern States of Kentucky and
 Tennessee will not allow a white man to marry with the friends of
 another Eastern State. They stand on a white pedestal. What we
 do not know is that today the Democrats are for the Southern Baptist
 Convention. They will not let us hear the IR. A long time has
 passed since the Baptist Convention met at Nashville. The Southern
 Convention has been held at Nashville. The Southern Convention
 has been held at Nashville. The Southern Convention has been held at Nashville.

5. 2. 3. 1. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100. 101. 102. 103. 104. 105. 106. 107. 108. 109. 110. 111. 112. 113. 114. 115. 116. 117. 118. 119. 120. 121. 122. 123. 124. 125. 126. 127. 128. 129. 130. 131. 132. 133. 134. 135. 136. 137. 138. 139. 140. 141. 142. 143. 144. 145. 146. 147. 148. 149. 150. 151. 152. 153. 154. 155. 156. 157. 158. 159. 160. 161. 162. 163. 164. 165. 166. 167. 168. 169. 170. 171. 172. 173. 174. 175. 176. 177. 178. 179. 180. 181. 182. 183. 184. 185. 186. 187. 188. 189. 190. 191. 192. 193. 194. 195. 196. 197. 198. 199. 200. 201. 202. 203. 204. 205. 206. 207. 208. 209. 210. 211. 212. 213. 214. 215. 216. 217. 218. 219. 220. 221. 222. 223. 224. 225. 226. 227. 228. 229. 230. 231. 232. 233. 234. 235. 236. 237. 238. 239. 240. 241. 242. 243. 244. 245. 246. 247. 248. 249. 250. 251. 252. 253. 254. 255. 256. 257. 258. 259. 260. 261. 262. 263. 264. 265. 266. 267. 268. 269. 270. 271. 272. 273. 274. 275. 276. 277. 278. 279. 280. 281. 282. 283. 284. 285. 286. 287. 288. 289. 290. 291. 292. 293. 294. 295. 296. 297. 298. 299. 300. 301. 302. 303. 304. 305. 306. 307. 308. 309. 310. 311. 312. 313. 314. 315. 316. 317. 318. 319. 320. 321. 322. 323. 324. 325. 326. 327. 328. 329. 330. 331. 332. 333. 334. 335. 336. 337. 338. 339. 340. 341. 342. 343. 344. 345. 346. 347. 348. 349. 350. 351. 352. 353. 354. 355. 356. 357. 358. 359. 360. 361. 362. 363. 364. 365. 366. 367. 368. 369. 370. 371. 372. 373. 374. 375. 376. 377. 378. 379. 380. 381. 382. 383. 384. 385. 386. 387. 388. 389. 390. 391. 392. 393. 394. 395. 396. 397. 398. 399. 400. 401. 402. 403. 404. 405. 406. 407. 408. 409. 410. 411. 412. 413. 414. 415. 416. 417. 418. 419. 420. 421. 422. 423. 424. 425. 426. 427. 428. 429. 430. 431. 432. 433. 434. 435. 436. 437. 438. 439. 440. 441. 442. 443. 444. 445. 446. 447. 448. 449. 450. 451. 452. 453. 454. 455. 456. 457. 458. 459. 460. 461. 462. 463. 464. 465. 466. 467. 468. 469. 470. 471. 472. 473. 474. 475. 476. 477. 478. 479. 480. 481. 482. 483. 484. 485. 486. 487. 488. 489. 490. 491. 492. 493. 494. 495. 496. 497. 498. 499. 500. 501. 502. 503. 504. 505. 506. 507. 508. 509. 510. 511. 512. 513. 514. 515. 516. 517. 518. 519. 520. 521. 522. 523. 524. 525. 526. 527. 528. 529. 530. 531. 532. 533. 534. 535. 536. 537. 538. 539. 540. 541. 542. 543. 544. 545. 546. 547. 548. 549. 550. 551. 552. 553. 554. 555. 556. 557. 558. 559. 560. 561. 562. 563. 564. 565. 566. 567. 568. 569. 570. 571. 572. 573. 574. 575. 576. 577. 578. 579. 580. 581. 582. 583. 584. 585. 586. 587. 588. 589. 590. 591. 592. 593. 594. 595. 596. 597. 598. 599. 600. 601. 602. 603. 604. 605. 606. 607. 608. 609. 610. 611. 612. 613. 614. 615. 616. 617. 618. 619. 620. 621. 622. 623. 624. 625. 626. 627. 628. 629. 630. 631. 632. 633. 634. 635. 636. 637. 638. 639. 640. 641. 642. 643. 644. 645. 646. 647. 648. 649. 650. 651. 652. 653. 654. 655. 656. 657. 658. 659. 660. 661. 662. 663. 664. 665. 666. 667. 668. 669. 670. 671. 672. 673. 674. 675. 676. 677. 678. 679. 680. 681. 682. 683. 684. 685. 686. 687. 688. 689. 690. 691. 692. 693. 694. 695. 696. 697. 698. 699. 700. 701. 702. 703. 704. 705. 706. 707. 708. 709. 710. 711. 712. 713. 714. 715. 716. 717. 718. 719. 720. 721. 722. 723. 724. 725. 726. 727. 728. 729. 730. 731. 732. 733. 734. 735. 736. 737. 738. 739. 740. 741. 742. 743. 744. 745. 746. 747. 748. 749. 750. 751. 752. 753. 754. 755. 756. 757. 758. 759. 760. 761. 762. 763. 764. 765. 766. 767. 768. 769. 770. 771. 772. 773. 774. 775. 776. 777. 778. 779. 780. 781. 782. 783. 784. 785. 786. 787. 788. 789. 790. 791. 792. 793. 794. 795. 796. 797. 798. 799. 800. 801. 802. 803. 804. 805. 806. 807. 808. 809. 810. 811. 812. 813. 814. 815. 816. 817. 818. 819. 820. 821. 822. 823. 824. 825. 826. 827. 828. 829. 830. 831. 832. 833. 834. 835. 836. 837. 83

BAG OF BONDS

wrong with you, where? Can't you take a hint?"

[illegible]

turning up like this

moved on to "Trust and Obedy," a dinner if there ever was one

The following is a list of the most important results of the present work.

1. The first result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) = f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = f(a)$.

2. The second result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) \neq f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = \frac{f(a) + f(b)}{2}$.

3. The third result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) = f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = f(a)$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

4. The fourth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) \neq f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = \frac{f(a) + f(b)}{2}$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

5. The fifth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) = f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = f(a)$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

6. The sixth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) \neq f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = \frac{f(a) + f(b)}{2}$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

7. The seventh result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) = f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = f(a)$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

8. The eighth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) \neq f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = \frac{f(a) + f(b)}{2}$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

9. The ninth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) = f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = f(a)$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

10. The tenth result is a theorem which states that if a function $f(x)$ is continuous on the interval $[a, b]$ and if $f(a) \neq f(b)$, then there exists at least one point c in the interval (a, b) such that $f(c) = \frac{f(a) + f(b)}{2}$ and $f'(c) = 0$.

Wiederholungsversuche mit anderen Versuchspersonen ergaben, dass die durchschnittliche Reaktionszeit bei der ersten Wiederholung mit 1,2 Sekunden (SD = 0,1 Sekunden) am niedrigsten war, während sie bei der fünften Wiederholung auf 1,5 Sekunden (SD = 0,1 Sekunden) anstieg.

You are not a Christian. You are a Jew.
 And a Jew is a man who goes to the synagogue.
 up there. He looks at the Jews and says:
 And the devil is the Jew. And the Jew
 tells you what to do? Act decent and let a lady walk

I see it all. As Day recedes and tides at last break out of their eyes under a blue cap in the rainy afternoon, the cap of a shattered remains of me swimming (that was her last confession). I see it all. I see her as she

$$\begin{aligned} & \mathcal{A}_\alpha(t) = \alpha \mathcal{A}_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } \mathcal{A}_\alpha(0) = 0, \\ & f_\alpha(t) = f_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } f_\alpha(0) = 0, \\ & \mathcal{A}_\alpha(t) = \mathcal{A}_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } \mathcal{A}_\alpha(0) = 0, \\ & \text{and } p_\alpha(t) = p_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } p_\alpha(0) = 0, \\ & f_\alpha(t) = f_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } f_\alpha(0) = 0, \\ & p_\alpha(t) = p_\alpha(t) \quad \text{for } t \in [0, \infty) \quad \text{and } p_\alpha(0) = 0. \end{aligned}$$

STEPHEN KING

but the last determination however I have the such ones to be a frustration.
R₂ out a small hole, be careful not to make a hole in the seal itself.
until the water is only R₂ gas with some the old gas in it. In the middle
between the two is a very good one but not as good as the first one. I hope
it is the best. And here too, as only even from and really just the one hole, it is

[illegible]

*When we walk with the Lord
in the light of His word,
what a glory He sheds on our way!*

I'm stronger than you, sugar *Wanda* I'm meaner than you, you may be the *bad girl* but I'm the queen bee and if you don't want me stinging on you, you best clear me the rest of my path

Yes, it is. I've got a lot more work to do and I think the net has got to be a whole lot better in the short run, but by the very long run, we have to get to the point that we feel that we are doing as good as they, better.

I was disappointed and took profit from the early 1980s. I mentioned the
to J. P. ... and ... and all ... the ... the ...
and ... the ... the ... And ...
... the ... the ... the ...
... the ... the ... the ...
... the ... the ... the ...
... the ... the ... the ...
... the ... the ... the ...
... the ... the ... the ...

[illegible]

BAG OF BONES

As they are, they are, and I

"Don't let her! Don't let her holler!"

But V. and I, and the others, and the others,

and I, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

loses neither consciousness nor his erection

Once P. and I, and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

Auster yanks her hair but it tears her dress off one shoulder, and begins to smother
on her neck

Oh, and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

and the others, and the others,

Get her in there deep."

They don't. They can't. They are too eager to have his bag arm-yank her

about the present I give up and call it good. She doesn't pray exactly out of pity for me. She prays so that I let her live. She prays for Keri to stay close to Karpeller & so that I can by cutting away the cord of it. She prays that if he was taken out of it to catch up with her, he will wait a moment's happenings and run the other way as fast as he can, run silent and get Reg.

So it is at a month. George Abernethy put "I'd get you at me
you bitch."

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

8. *It is possible that the method used to collect the data used in the study is flawed, and the results may be biased.* (Shapley et al., 2013)

Rose is a talented actress, after all, and she is a good friend of mine. I like to see her in a new role, and I am sure she will be a great success. I am sure she will be a great success. I am sure she will be a great success.

BAG OF MONS

my name, you bastard!"

fusion and fright.

falling place she hears him, she hears, her darling one, he is

screaming. The red bus is red and is like a very big red car, carrying people and not carrying stones. The red bus is like a car that has no memory of walking here, as it has no eyes, ears, nose and pity. Was she crazy? Well, no, no, no. No, she was not. The bus was steady but no longer steady. The red bus is like a car that is on the gray road for a few seconds and then it is gone and the others were gone.

Therape and glass stem reflected by a mirror, the sky was
cataskast. I tried to find a way to get out of the sun, but
and George had given me a small ship, but I was not
nose with fingers that felt like an insect, a small
relatively Better Not. I had a long time to get out of the
was undoubtedly what she wanted.

Notwithstanding these observations, it is clear that the system of anther and filament elongation is greater than that of the pistil. This is supported by the observations made on the floral bud elongation of *Phlox pilularis* (see above), even though we have not measured staminal tube elongation under the blade.

"No! Don't you dare!"

She was stronger down here, perhaps because it had happened here. Was that possible? I didn't know and didn't care. All I cared about was getting this done. Where the roots were thicker, I hacked through them with the pruning knife.

"Leave me be!"

Now I *did* look around, risked one quick glance because of the unnatural crackling sounds which had accompanied her voice—which now seemed to *make* her voice. The Green Lady was gone. The witch had somehow become Sara Tidwell—it was Sara's face growing out of the criss-crossing branches and shiny leaves. That rain-slicked face swayed, dissolved, came together, melted away, came together again. For a moment it, the mystery I had sensed down here was revealed. Her lamp-shining eyes were utterly human. They stared at me with hate and supplication.

"I ain't done!" she cried in a cracked, breaking voice. "He was the worst, don't you understand? He was the worst and it's his blood in her and I won't rest until I *have it out!*"

There was a greasy merrypopping sound. She had inhabited the birch, made it into a physical body of some sort and intended to tear it free of the earth. So we did come and get me with it if she could—kill me with it if she could. Strangle me in limber branches. Staff me with leaves until I looked like a Christmas decoration.

"No matter how much of a monster he was, Kyr had nothing to do with what he did," I said. "And you won't have her."

"Yes I *will!*" the Green Lady screamed. The ripping, rending sounds were louder now. They were joined by a missing snake-rattle. I didn't look around again. I didn't *even* look around. I dug faster instead. "Yes I *will* have her!" she cried, and now the voice was closer. She was coming for me but I refused to see, when it comes to walking trees and bushes. I'll stick to Mr. *Will*—trunks. I *will* have her! He took me and I *must*, *take him!*

"Go away," a new voice said.

The spade loosened in my hands, a most fool. I turned and saw Jo standing below me and to my right. She was looking at Sara—who had materialized into a gnathial acornation—a monstrous green-as-a-black

$\{A_1, \dots, A_n\} \subseteq \mathcal{A}$ and $\{B_1, \dots, B_n\} \subseteq \mathcal{B}$.

[illegible]

In it, Sara's face came and went, came and went

me, it was always her, too.

[illegible]

as it had raised them to me in my worst nightmares.

Here, Miss Younessi says, "It's not that we don't let one of the Outsiders in, and they're very dangerous."

'Jo, I love you.'

'I love you too.'

[illegible]

'*Harry, Mike!*' she screamed. '*Harry!*'

I bent to the job.

The whole story is so thrilling that I just can't wait to tell you. I've been working so hard that I don't even have time to sleep. I'm so tired that I can't even think about it. I want to tell you everything, but I can't. I want to tell you everything, but I can't. I want to tell you everything, but I can't.

revenge, had let in something Jo called an Outsider. I had no idea what that might be and never *would* to know. Sara was its condottier, I knew that much. And if I could take care of her in time—

I reached into the dripping hole, slapping wet earth from the ancient canvas. Faint stencilled letters appeared when I did: I M McCURDIE SAW M.L. McCurdie's boat burned in the fires of '33, I know I'd seen a picture of it in flames somewhere. As I seized the canvas, the tips of my fingers poking through and letting out a fresh billow of green and grassy stench, I could hear grunting. I could hear

“Don’t let them get a step on you and counting like a pig. Sooner some of us are in the water than the other. If you want to live, you’ve got to go. Don’t let them get a step on you. At Deep Finney and Fred Dunn. They have just offered to go and you’ve got to come with them. If you don’t go, you’ll be a little dead. Sooner take the boat and if they get into the Merced River, you’ll be a little dead. Tell the Society to come. Sooner they may be able to save one vessel than a hundred. Don’t let them get a step on you. Put them in the water, that’s all up. You’ve got to go with them. If you don’t, you’ll be a little dead.”

“What do you mean?” Ben Merrill asks.

[illegible]

$\bigwedge_{i \in \mathbb{N}} \int_{\partial B_i} f' \cdot B_{\mathbb{R}^n} \cdot \nu = \int_{\partial B} f' \cdot B_{\mathbb{R}^n} \cdot \nu$ and that $f_{\mathbb{R}^n} \in L^1(\mathbb{R}^n)$ w.r.t. the knife,

[illegible]

But, as we have seen, the 1960s were a time when the political and social climate was not conducive to the kind of radical change that was needed. The political system was dominated by a conservative establishment, and the social norms of the time were largely based on conformity and conformity with the status quo. The political and social climate of the 1960s was not conducive to the kind of radical change that was needed.

BAG OF BONDS

puddle . . . that's another one altogether

'Run, honey!' Sara cries. "Run away and get ' ' Iared clamps his hand around her throat and begins choking.

in a kind of desperate whim, and Harry replied:

[illegible]

"Hurry!" he cried. "I can't hold it much longer!"

It started at five o'clock. The two children were sitting on a deer-skinsmatted bare, enough to support an adult, waiting for the carry bag with Sapsu's Greens packed on it to be opened as

[illegible][illegible]

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

I slammed the heel of my hand into the center of my forehead to clear these , hauntings away. Behind me there was a frenzied snap and crackle of wet bushes as Jo and I whatever she was holding back continued to struggle. I put my hands inside the split in the canvas like a doctor

BAG OF LINES

tore the rest of the way up and down.

There was a wide range of different views on the importance of the role of the state in the provision of health care. Some people felt that the state should be responsible for providing health care, while others felt that the private sector should be responsible. The views of the respondents were divided, with some people feeling that the state should be responsible for providing health care, while others felt that the private sector should be responsible. The views of the respondents were divided, with some people feeling that the state should be responsible for providing health care, while others felt that the private sector should be responsible. The views of the respondents were divided, with some people feeling that the state should be responsible for providing health care, while others felt that the private sector should be responsible.

The larger of the two skiffs blew overboard, and the smaller one, a yawl, was wrecked. Its captain, a man of about 40 years of age, was killed. Below it began a rending as pieces of wreckage sailed up and down. At last, hardly all were seen any more. The red, but sooty, mists came down. The rusty buckle rose like the head of a snake.

"Mike!" Jo screamed "Quick, quick."

[illegible]

There was a hiss against the door, a creak, a rattle, a knock. The door opened, a black woman, tall and simple like things made out of cast iron, a child that Mexican children might call a *compañero*—a friend—Dead. The eyes, sockets of Sra. Sisk, I was now sure, were not dark hollows where her mind, her spirit, had retreated, as I had once believed. It was an expression that took the first surprise and then like sorrow.

The jaw fell off; the nubs of the teeth sizzled away.

The top of the skull caved in.

Spread fingerbones uttered, then milked

"Oohhhehehe"

It was observed that the skin stresses were $\sigma_{\text{max}} = 1.5 \times 10^6$ N/m².

wind had died as the wet air caught its breath before the next onslaught. It was a sound of unspeakable grief and longing and surrender. I sensed no hate in it, her hate was gone—burned away in the corrosive I had bought in Helen Aaster's shop. The sound of Sara's going was replaced by the plaintive, almost human cry of a bird, and it awoke me from the place where I had been brought me finally and completely out of the zone. I got shakily to my feet, turned around, and looked at The Street.

Jo was still there, a dim form through which I could now see the lake and the dark curves of the next thunder squall coming over the mountains. Something flashed beyond her—that bird venturing out of its safe covert for a peek at the rearranged environment, perhaps—but I barely registered that. It was Jo I wanted to see, Jo who had come God knew how far and suffered God knew how much to help me. She looked exhausted, hurt—in some fundamental way diminished. But the other thing—the Outsider—was gone. Jo, standing in a ring of birch leaves so dark they looked charcoal, turned to me and smiled.

"Jo! We did it!"

Her mouth moved. I heard the sound, but the words were too distant to make out. She was standing right there, but she might have been counting off a wide canyon. Still, I understood her. I read the words off her lips if you prefer the rational, right out of her mind if you prefer the romantic. I prefer the latter. Marriage is a zone, too, you know. Marriage is a zone.

So that's all right, isn't it?

I glanced down into the gaping roll of canvas and saw nothing but streaks and splatters staking out of a noxious, uneasy paste. I got a whiff, and even through the Stenomask it made me cough and back away. Not a pretty picture. When I looked back around at Jo, she was barely there.

"Jo! Wait."

Can't help. Can't stay.

Wires from a character's system barely glimpsed on a fading mouth. Now she was little more than eyes floating in the dark afternoon, eyes which seemed made of the lake behind them.

—Hurry . . .

She was gone. I slipped and stumbled to the place where she'd been

PAGE OF NOTES

$$S_{\mathcal{K}}(x, y) = \inf_{\mathcal{K}} \left\{ \int_0^1 |x'(t) - y'(t)| dt : x(0) = y(0), x(1) = y(1) \right\}$$

However, an alternative interpretation of the results is that the results of satisfaction were generated by the experimental design.

Then what? I was told that the only way to get out of the forest was to follow the river to the west. I went to the river and followed it for a mile. I found a small hut on the bank. I went in and found a man sitting there. He told me that the river was the only way out. I followed it for a mile and found a small hut. I went in and found a man sitting there. He told me that the river was the only way out. I followed it for a mile and found a small hut. I went in and found a man sitting there. He told me that the river was the only way out.

Can't help *can't stay* , *Larry*

God grant she live stille

[illegible][illegible]

In the front hall I stopped to look at a painting of a woman in a blue dress. I wrote Le Corbusier, Le M. Bours, and a note about the painting. I then went to the kitchen and found a box of tea. I had a cup of tea and then went to the living room. I found a box of tea and then went to the living room. I found a box of tea and then went to the living room.

arrying Ki when we came in. They should have been, but they weren't. The others were smaller, but not so small that I mistook them for a child's.

I ran down the hall to the north bedroom crying her name, and I might as well have been crying *Martin* or *Jo* or *Sarah*. Coming out of my mouth, Ki's name sounded like the name of a corpse. The duvet had been thrown back onto the floor. Except for the black stuffed dog, lying where it had in my dream, the bed was empty. And Ki was gone.

A single white hair

I looked at it with a sick lack of surprise. I should have known, of course, and if not for the strain I'd been under and the successive shocks of this terrible day, I *would* have known. It was all on the tape Jenn had played for me that morning — a time that already seemed part of another man's life.

For one thing, there was the time check marking the point where John had hung up on her. *Nine-forty four. Eastern Daylight*, the robot voice had said, which meant that Rogette had been calling at six-forty in the morning — if, that was, she'd really been calling from Palm Springs. That was at least possible. Had the oddity occurred to me while we were driving from the airport to Martin's tract, I would have told myself that there were no doubt insomniacs all over California who finished their East Coast business before the sun had hauled itself fully over the horizon, and good for them. But there was something else that couldn't be explained away so easily.

At one point John had ejected the tape. He said it because, he said, I'd gone as white as sheet instead of looking amused. I had told him to go on and play the rest; it had just surprised me to hear her again. *The quality — but time. Could the adaptation be real?* Except it was really the boys in the basement who had reacted to John's tape — my subconscious co-conspirators. And it hadn't been her *time* that had scared them badly enough to turn my face white. The undernum had done that. The characteristic underham you always got on TR calls, both those you made and those you received.

Rogette Waitmore had never left TR 90 at all. If my failing to realize that this morning cost her her life this afternoon, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I told God that over and over as I went plunging down the railroad tie steps again, running into the face of a revitalized storm.

It's a blue-eyed wonder I didn't go flying right off the embankment. Had my swimming float had grounds to there — and perhaps I could have impaled myself on its splintered boards and died like a vampire writhing on a stake. What a pleasant thought *that* was.

Running isn't good for people near panic — it's like scratching poison

BAG OF BONDS

By the time he finished the first round of the 1980s, the state's housing program had been cut off and the state's housing program was in a state of disrepair. It wasn't room for much else.

Then I struck a lightning bolt, and I felt the rain
 knock the last one out of my hat. I was
 which I probably been to when I was
 over a lake, and it was a good thing
 and I had the scatters of the strike. I was
 the other path of a lightning bolt, and I felt the rain
 There was a ponding, and I was
 some toppling into the lake, and I was
 section, and between the grass and the water, I was
 fire in the rain, burning like a witch's hat.

It had the effect of a slap, coming in before I had time to think. I didn't need to use my brain. I took a breath and felt the heat of the sun on my face. Why not? I come down here in the first place. Why not? I was here. I had brought Kara toward the cave where I hoped to find a way to bring her away from my captors. I looked at Kara. She was looking at me.

sent the boys' body back to California in his private jet

She tried to make out their face, which was not far from the front of the car, but she could not see clearly. She would have taken Karl and the boy out of the car and run carrying back and forth, but she was not sure they might be trying to get hold of the kid—

[illegible]

For the left-hand side, we have $\text{tr}(\mathbf{A}^2) = \sum_{i=1}^n \lambda_i^2$ and $\text{tr}(\mathbf{A}) = \sum_{i=1}^n \lambda_i$. So

come down here. Turned right, turned north. Toward the birch, the rock, the bag of bones. I'd done what I had to do, and while I was doing it, Rogette carried Kyra down the railroad tie steps behind me and turned left on The Street. Turned south toward Warrington's. With a sinking feeling deep in my belly, I realized I had probably heard Ki might even have seen her. That odd pecking timidly out from cover during the lull had been no bird. Ki was awake by then. Ki had seen me—perhaps not seen Jo, as well—and tried to call out. She had managed just that one little peep before Rogette had covered her mouth.

How long ago had that been? It seemed like forever, but I had an idea it hadn't been long at all—less than five minutes, maybe. But it doesn't take long to drown a child. The image of Kate's bare arm sticking straight out of the water tried to come back—the hand at the end of it opening and closing, opening and closing, as if it were trying to breathe for the lungs that couldn't—and I pushed it away. I also suppressed the urge to simply sprint in the direction of Warrington's. Panic would take me for sure if I did that.

In all the years since her death I had never longed for Jo with the bitter intensity I felt then. But she was gone—there wasn't even a whisper of her. With no one to depend on but myself, I started south, along the tree-lined Street, skirting the slowdowns where I could, crawling under them if they blocked my way entirely, taking the noisy branch-breaking course over the top only as a last resort. As I went I issued what I thought were all the standard prayers in such a situation, but none of them seemed to get past the image of Rogette Whitmore's face rising in my mind. Her screaming, merciless face.

I remember thinking *That's the only way to live, Grace. Here.* Certainly the words seemed intended to me as I struggled along—trees only I sensed in the first grand blow were falling by the score in this follow-up of wind and rain. The noise was like great crunching footfalls, and I didn't need to worry about the noise my own feet were making. When I passed the Batchelders' camp—a circular prewar construction sitting on a catnap of rocks like a hat on a footstool, I saw that the entire roof had been bashed flat by a hemlock.

BAG OF BONES

Half a mile south of Sir Isaac's fork, I saw a dark, hairy
the para I poked it up, plunked it down, and it was gone. I
blood. Then I stuffed it into my pocket and went on.

Five minutes later I came to the first of the small, shallow
across the path. It was still one of the most beautiful, most
bent network of spindlers, a space where the trees were
sarging water lilted and sloped, a water that was not
thirty feet now floating in the air. I saw a small, dark, hairy
when I dropped to my knees I saw a small, dark, hairy
in, with water I saw something else, a small, dark, hairy
into my pocket with the first.

I was halfway under the pin when I heard a little voice, a
one machine user. It said it was followed by a small, dark, hairy
but surprised anger. Then even over the hiss of the rain I could
could hear Rogette's voice: "*Come back! Don't go out there, it's dangerous!*"

I squirmed the rest of the way, under the tree, and I saw
stamp of a branch when I reached a small, dark, hairy
and sprinted along the path. The tall, thin, dark, hairy
hurdled them with a slow, slow, slow. It was a small, dark, hairy
over with no thought to where they might be. I saw a small, dark, hairy
whicked. There was a brilliant stroke of lightning, and I saw
gray barnyard and the high the trees. On the way I had seen
only been able to catch glimpses of Warrent's face, a small, dark, hairy
est had been the open, dark, hairy, this was a small, dark, hairy
recovering. The judges' feet had had been the way, a small, dark, hairy
pair of huge trees that seemed to be the only, the only, the only
like a knife and fork on a fine's plate. It was a small, dark, hairy.

Ky's voice rising over the storm, a small, dark, hairy, a small, dark, hairy
'Go away! I don't want you, white nana! Go away!' It was horrible to hear
the terror in her voice, but wonderful to hear her voice at all.

About thirty feet from where Rogette's shadow had been, I saw
one more tree, lay across the path. Rogette's shadow had been
it, holding a hand, it to Ky. The last was a small, dark, hairy
noticed. It was Kyra I noticed.

The dark running between the street and the street was a small, dark, hairy.

one—seventy feet at least, perhaps a hundred. Long enough so that on a pretty summer evening you could stroll it hand-in-hand with your date or your lover and make a memory. The storm hadn't torn it away—not yet—but the wind had twisted it like a ribbon. I remember newsreel footage at some childhood Saturday matinee, film of a suspension bridge caving in a hurricane, and that was what the dock between Warringtons and The Sunset Bar looked like. It jounced up and down in the surging water, groaning in all its slatted joints like a wooden accordion. There had been a rail—presumably to guide those who'd made a heavy night of it safely back to shore—but it was gone now. Kyra was halfway out along this swaying, sloping length of wood. I could see at least three rectangles of blackness between the shore and where she stood, places where boards had snapped off. From beneath the dock came the disturbance *clunk-clunk-clunk* of the empty steel drums that were holding it up. Several of these drums had come unmoored and were floating away. Ki had her arms stretched out for balance like a tightrope walker in the circus. The black Harley Davidson tee-shirt flapped around her knees and sunburned shoulders.

Come back! Reggie cried. Her dark hair flew around her head, the sandy black raincoat she was wearing rippled. She was holding both hands out now, one blackly and one not. I had an idea Ki might have bitten her.

No, come to me! Ki shook her head in wild negation and I wanted to tell her don't do that. Ki-nurd, don't shake your head like that, very bad idea. She tottered, one arm pointed up at the sky and one down at the water so she looked for a moment like an airplane in a steep bank. At the dock snapping that moment to take a hard buck beneath her, Ki would have spilled off the side. She regained some precarious balance instead, although I thought I saw her bare feet slide a little on the slick boards. *Come back, come back! I do it to you! Go—go, take a nap, you look tired!*

Ki didn't see it at all, her attention was fixed on the white nana. The white nana didn't see me, either. I dropped to my belly and squirmed under the tree, pulling myself along with my clawed hands. Thunder rolled across the lake like a big mahogany ball, the sound echoing off

I ran the last dozen feet, raising my joined hands like a club, but I slipped a little on the wet ground at the crucial moment and Rogette made a kind of ducking crouch. Instead of striking her at the back of the neck as I'd meant to, my joined hands only glanced off her shoulder. She staggered, went to one knee, and was up again almost at once. Her eyes were like little blue arc-lamps, spitting rage instead of electricity. "Yes," she said, hissing the word over the top of her tongue, turning it into the sound of some ancient curse. *Hachatan*. Behind as Kyra screamed my name, staggered on the wet wood, an I waving her arms in an effort to keep from falling in the lake. Water slopped onto the deck and ran over her small bare feet.

Hold on, Ki. I called back. Rogette saw my attention shift and took her chance. She spun and ran out onto the dock. I sprang after her, grabbed her by the hair, and it came off in my hand. All of it. I stood there at a little distance, staring like with her mat of white hair dangling from my fist like a scalp.

Rogette looked over her shoulder, snarling, an ancient bald gnome in the rain, and I thought *Yes, you did. Do you remember that old time when you were a little girl, fifteen years old, she is the one who went back to California on the jet*.

Even as she turned the other way again and began to run toward Ki, I knew better. It was Rogette. All right, but she'd come by that hideous resemblance honestly. Whatever was wrong with her had done more than make her horrible, said that had aged her as well. Seventy, I'd thought, but that was at least ten years beyond the actual mark.

That's the way it is, the way it is. Mrs. M. had told me *That's the way it is*. Max Devere must have thought so too, because he had named a son Roger and a daughter Rogette. Perhaps she'd come by the Whitmore part honestly. She might have been married in her younger years. But once the wig was gone, her antecedents were beyond argument. The woman tottering along the wet dock to finish the job was Kyra's aunt.

Ki began to back up rapidly, making no effort to be careful and pick her footing. She was going into the drink; there was no way she could stay

quarters of her came out of the lake like a gigantic, frothy treat. She screamed, carried her head forward, and buried her teeth in my wrist. The pain was immediate and enormous. I jerked my arm up even higher and then brought it down, not thinking about hurting her, wanting only to rid myself of that weasel's mouth. Another wave hit the half-submerged duck as I did. Its rising, splintered edge impaled Regette's descending face. One eye popped, a dripping yellow spanter ran up her nose like a dagger, the scant skin of her forehead split, snapping away from the bone like two suddenly released windowshades. Then the lake pulled her away. I saw the tern topography of her face a moment longer, upturned into the torrential rain, wet and as pale as the light from a fluorescent bar. Then she rolled over, her black vinyl raincoat swirling around her like a shroud.

What I saw when I looked back toward The Sunset Bar was another glimpse under the skin of this world—but one far different from the face of Sara in the Green Lady or the snarling, half-glimpsed snape of the Outsider. Kyra stood on the wide wooden porch in front of the bar amid a litter of overturned wicker furniture. In front of her was a waterspout in which I could still see—very faintly—the fading shape of a woman. She was on her knees, holding her arms out.

They tried to embrace. Kyra's arms went through Mattie and came out dripping. "Mommy, I can't get you!"

The woman in the water was speaking. I could see her lips moving. Kyra looked at her rapt. Then, for just a moment Mattie turned to me. Our eyes met, and hers were made of the lake. They were Dark Score, which was here long before I came and will remain long after I am gone. I put my hands to my mouth, kissed my palms, and held them out to her. Shimmering hands went up, as if to catch those kisses.

Wooooo! Kyra screamed, and flung her arms around the figure. She was immediately drenched and backed away with her eyes squinted shut, coughing. There was no longer a woman with her, there was only water running across the boards and dripping through the cracks to rejoin the lake, which comes up from deep springs far below, from the fissures in the rock which underlies the TR and all this part of our world.

BAG OF BONES

Moving carefully along the sidewalk, I was surprised to hear a long, low wailing creak. The Senior Bar Woman had slipped out of her arms. She begged me right she was hurt, but I couldn't hear the small dice up from the other side of the street.

"Mattie came," she said.

"I know, I saw her."

"Mattie made the white nana go away."

I saw that, too. He very st. In a Ki Way, she was a good girl, but you can't move around a lot of things. I was a good girl.

She was good as gold. When we were on The Street, she was a good girl to put her down, she was a good girl, she was a good girl. I thought of taking her into Warrington's Bar. I thought of her being there, probably dry clothes as well. But I had an excellent idea, probably be a bathtub full of warm water waiting in there. Besides, the rain was slackening again, in this time the sky looked a little better.

What did Mattie tell you about? I asked as we walked north along The Street. Ki would let me put her down, so we could row across the downed trees we came to, but I asked her a mistake, so we could wait on the far side of each.

To be a good girl and not to say, but I don't know what she began to cry, and I stroked her wet hair.

By the time we got to the top of the steps, she was a good girl, but I was a good girl, and over the mountain, she was a good girl, she was a good girl, it very brilliant wedge of blue.

All the woods fell down, Ki said, looking at the trees, they were very wide.

"Well . . . not all, but a lot of them, I guess."

Halfway up the steps I paused, sitting and waiting, and I didn't ask Ki if I could put her down, though I didn't want to put her down. I just wanted to catch my breath.

"Mike?"

"What, doll?"

"Mattie told me something else."

"What?"

"Can I whisper?"

"If you want to, sure."

Ki leaned close, put her lips to my ear, and whispered

I listened. When she was done I nodded, kissed her cheek, saffted her to the other hip, and carried her the rest of the way up to the house.

"I can't be certain of the victory, Jimmy, and don't you go thinking that it was, Nasser."

So said the old-timers who sat in front of the big Army medical tent that served as the Lakeview General that late summer and fall. A huge cam had toppled across Route 68 and dashed the store in like a Saltines box. Adding in fury to insult, the elm had carried a bunch of spitting live lines with it. They ignited propane from a ruptured tank, and the whole thing went kaboom. The tent was a pretty good warm-weather substitute, though, and folks on the IR took to saying they was going down to the MASH for bread and beer—this because you could still see a faded red cross on both sides of the tent's roof.

The old-timers sat along one canvas wall in folding chairs, waving to other old-timers when they went potting by in their rusty old-timer cars (alleged old-timers own leather Fords or Chevys, so I'm well on my way in that regard—swapping their undershirts for flannels as the days began to cool toward colder season and spud digging, watching the township start to rebuild itself around them. And as they watched they talked about the ice storm of the past winter, the one that knocked out lights and splintered a million trees between Kittery and Fort Kent; they talked about the cyclones that touched down in August of 1985; they talked about the sklet hurricane of 1977. Now *there* was some steam, they said. *There* was some steam, by God.

I'm sure they've got a point, and I don't argue with them—you rarely win an argument with a genuine Yankee old-timer, never if it's about the weather. But for the storm of July 21, 1998, will always be *the* storm. And I know a little girl who feels the same. She may live until 2100, given all the benefits of modern medicine, but I think that for Kyrä Elizabeth Devereaux will always be *the* storm. The one where her dead mother came to her dressed in the lake.

+ + *

"Why?"

Because they can embarrass you. *Can you look to baton you* was what rose to mind, but I wouldn't say that. Because they can embarrass you in later life.

"Oh."

Besides, I said. "These papers are like your ribbons, in a way.

"You don't like them anymore."

"Right."

She saw the box again—the tin box with JOSS NOTIONS written on the front. It was on the counter between the living room and the sink, not far from where old Krazy Kat had hung on the wall. I didn't remember bringing the box up from the studio with me, but I suppose I might not have. I was pretty freaked. I also think it could have come up—kind of by itself. I don't believe such things now. I have reason to.

Kyras eyes lit up in a way they hadn't since she had awakened from her secret nap to find out her mother was dead. She stood on tiptoe to take hold of the box, then ran her small fingers across the gilt letters. I thought about how important it was for a kid to own a tin box. You had to have one for your secret stuff—the best toy, the prettiest bit of lace, the first piece of jewelry. Or a picture of your mother, perhaps.

"This is so . . . pretty," she said in a soft, awed voice.

You can have it if you don't mind it saying JOSS NOTIONS instead of KISS NOTIONS. There are some papers in it I want to read, but I could put them somewhere else."

She looked at me to make sure I wasn't kidding, saw I wasn't.

"I'd love it," she said in the same soft, awed voice.

I took the box from her, scooped out the stenc books, notes, and clip-pings, then handed it back to K. She practiced taking the lid off and then putting it back on.

"Guess what I'll put in here," she said.

"Secret treasures?"

Yes," she said, and actually smiled for a moment. "Who was Jo Moss? Don't know her? I do, don't I? Sae was one of the tridgedator people."

"She—"

A thought occurred. I shuffled through the yellowed clip-pings. Nothing. I thought I'd lost it somewhere along the way, then saw

corrected what I was thinking to myself and said,

steno notebooks. I slid it out and handed it to Ki.

"What is it?"

"A backwards photo. Hold it up to the light."

Sue did, and look. Her face, the one I'd seen in the

my wife in her hand. My wife standing in a business suit, a two-piece suit.

"That's Jo," I said.

"Sue's pretty. I'm glad to have her box for my things."

"I am too, Ki." I kissed the top of her head.

When Sue left Redwood, I answered the door to the sheriff's answer with my hands up. I was nervous. I wasn't sure the situation was a simple, uncalculated question.

"Where's Alan Pangborn these days, Sheriff?"

"Over New Hampshire," Redwood said. "A few days ago, a minute or two later he posted red twigs out across the road. He had a message. He and Pangborn had seen each other recently. That's nasty, I guess, but I guess it's a long way from here. A long quite awhile if they get a good day's work and a few more. What I think, Mr. Noonan, I have a lot of forest out there. A lot of that, don't you?"

"Yes."

First, it was most important to see her. I said, Ki, D.

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I'll be happy to show you."

We walked down the narrow way to the road, and then to the bedroom in a way looking in. The light was pale, and the room was sleeping deeply. The state of things was not a good one. I stood just seconds more, looking out the state of things, looking out at the other. We stood there for a few more seconds, looking anything, watching her sleep in a bed that was not a bed. In the whole, the room was a good one, and the way.

Around the eyes, I said, laughs, and then some more.

EPILOGUE

It snowed for Christmas – a polite snow, when I was out there, the carolers working the streets of Santard – I know I was out there *all winter long*. By the time I came back to see how long it had been, third time it was quarter past one on the morning of the twenty-sixth, and the snow had stopped. At the time when the pidgeon was taken through the unravelling fluff of clouds.

I was Christmasing with Frank again, at the very same table, two of the kids, Kim and John, were less than twelve, seeing that I had the biennial of food and presents. Frank was coming to Scotland to be born a three Scotch story at that, even was it a little less than a year. I drank the toast with my first one. I thought I had a good one, but it was a quite heavy one for Kim. On the occasion when I was out there, I don't drink so much as a glass of beer. And I was out there, I was out there, but she was out there, and I was out there, and I was out there, what the hell is Christmas for?

Are you all right? Frank asked, and I said, I was out there, I was out there, another little token sip from my glass.

I grinned at that. Not *so* all right but *are* *you* all right. Well, nobody ever said Frank was stupid.

"You should've seen me when the Department of Human Services let me have her for a weekend in October. I must have checked on her a dozen times before I went to bed—and then I *kept* checking. Getting up and pecking in on her, listening to her breathe. I didn't sleep a wink Friday night, caught maybe three hours on Saturday. So this is a big improvement. But if you ever blab any of what I've told you, Frank—if they ever hear about me nking up that bathtub before the storm knocked the genie out—I can kiss my chances of adopting her goodbye. I'd probably have to fill out a form in triplicate before they even let me attend her high-school graduation."

I hadn't meant to tell Frank the bathtub part, but once I started talking, almost everything spilled out. I suppose it had to spill to someone if I was ever to get on with my life. I'd assumed that John Storrow would be the one on the other side of the confessional when the time came, but John didn't want to talk about any of those events except as they bore on our ongoing legal business, which nowadays is all about Kyra Elizabeth Devore.

"I'll keep my mouth shut. Don't worry. How goes the adoption battle?"

Shit. I've come to loathe the State of Maine court system—and DHS as well. You take the people who work in these bureaucracies one by one and they're mostly nice, but when you put them together—

"Bad, huh?"

I sometimes feel like a character in *Black Hound*. That's the one where Dickens says that in court nobody wins but the lawyers. John tells me to be patient and recount my blessings, that we're making amazing progress considering that I'm that most untrustworthy of creatures, an unmarried white male of middle age—but Ki's been in two foster-home situations since Mattie died, and

"Doesn't she have kin in one of those neighboring towns?"

Mattie's aunt. She didn't want anything to do with Ki when Mattie was alive and has even less interest now. Especially since—

"—since Ki's not going to be rich."

"Yeah."

The Whitmore woman was born about 1900 and

A wealthy He had everything to expect a fine
 Easter goblet, can, etc. etc. etc. With
 crumbers of the world, I don't think I can

"How is John?"

Pretty well, indeed, but a shock to the
 arm back entirely. He damned near died of blood loss."

Frank had died me, was the first time I saw him. Knew
 care well for a man, deep, and I was the first to see him. I was
 to go. I had hardly been to the house, but I was the first to see him.
 these homes where the Department of Health Service
 children like knuckleheads nobody wants. Knew, of course, but
 but only existed in them, pale and listless, like a white rat in
 a cage. Each time she saw my car turning, I'd put it down
 waving her arms and dancing like a madman. I was so. One
 in October had been wonderful. Despite the fact that I was
 every had no, or so after it was as up, and then Christmas had
 been even better. Her emphatic desire to do with the was, of course, more
 more than anything else. Yet the same still ran on.

Maybe at the first. Mr. John told me. He was a new lawyer, a
 pale and serious. The slightly arrogant eager boy who had seen
 nothing more than to go, and to head with Mr. Maxwell. Big
 Devore was no longer in evidence. John had learned of his
 mortality on the twenty-first of June, and he was the first to
 idiotic, as well. The man who had been his first, and who
 left hand instead of his right was no longer in evidence. He
 puked. He was seeing a girl in Philly, me. He had been
 friends. I had no idea if it was serious or not. But I was
 mouthed a bit at that point of his life. But I was a
 accord seeing the daughter. I was his first, and he was

Maybe in the spring it was his first, and he was
 W. I was the first, and he was. I asked him, and he was
 giving and another setback.

At last, he replied. At last, he was. At last, he was. At last, he was.

made an ugly little gesture, poking the index finger of his left hand in and out of his loosely cupped right fist.

That's blatant sex discrimination, John.

You're not serious, it's just plain blame it on every damned asshole who's decided he had a right to take off some little kid's pants if you want blame it on the next victim. You want to blame it on some rays if you want. It's a damn piece of shit, but you're going to stick it in the end. You're not a doctor, would you to get Kevlar shot? I would fight with Mike, I'd carry Judge and DHS takes the rest. — I can't shoot, I can't carry, I can't keep all of them in a matter of a few weeks, I can't and I can't carry them, I can't do it at all. — and most of all, finally, you're got me.

I had something else to say—what he had whispered in my ear as I passed, to catch my breath on the steps. I'd never told John about that, and it was one of the few things I didn't tell Frank, either.

Mattie says I'm your little girl now, she had whispered. — Mattie says you to take care of me.

I was trying to—as much as the fucking slowpokes at Human Services would let me—but the waiting was hard.

Frank picked up the Scotch and tilted it in my direction. I shook my head. He nattered heart set on snowman-making, and I wanted to be able to face the glare of early sun on fresh snow without a headache.

"Frank, how much of this do you actually believe?"

He poured for himself, then just sat for a time, looking down at the table and thinking. When he raised his head again there was a smile on his face. It was so much like Joe's that it broke my heart. And when he spoke, he juiced his ordinarily faint Boston brogue.

Sate said I'm a salt-crunk Irishman who just finished listening to the granddaddy of all ghost stories on Cat Street tonight—he said, "I believe all of it, you silly git."

I laughed and said, I lie. We did it mostly through the nose, as men attempt to do when up late, maybe in their caps a little, and don't want to wake the house.

"Come on—how much really?"

All of it, he repeated, dropping the brogue. Because Joe believed it. And because of her. He nodded his head in the direction of the stairs so

Randolph Footman. Randolph is George's middle name. Mr. Footman is now residing in Shawshank State Prison."

"What about Rogette?"

"Well, Whitmore was her mother's maiden name, but I think it's safe to say that Rogette's heart belonged to Daddy. She had leukemia, was diagnosed in 1970. In people her age—she was only fifty-seven when she died, by the way—it's fatal in two cases out of every three, but she was doing the chemo. Hence the wig."

Why did she try to kill Kyra? I don't understand that. If you broke Sara Tidwell's head on this earthly plane of ours when you dissolved her, I wish the curse should have—why are you looking at me that way?"

You don't understand if you'd ever met Devore, I said. This is the man who let the whole tacking TR on the bus as a way of saying goodbye when he headed west to sunny California. I thought of him the second I pulled the wig off, thought they'd swapped identities somehow. Then I thought *Oh no, it's her and it's her! Rogette, she's just like her mother*.

"And you were right. The chemo."

I was also wrong. I knew more about ghosts than I did, Frank. Maybe the most important thing is that what you see first, what you think first—that's what's usually true. It was him that day, Devore. He came back at the end. I'm sure of it. At the end it wasn't about Sara, not for him. At the end it wasn't even about Kyra. At the end it was about Scooter Larrabee's sled."

Silence between us. For a few moments it was so deep that I could actually hear the house breathing. You can hear that, you know. If you really listen. That's something else I know now.

"Christ," he said at last.

I don't think Devore came east from California to kid her, I said. "That wasn't the original plan."

Tell me what was? Get to know his granddaughter? Mend his fences?

"God, no. You still don't understand what he was."

"Tell me, then."

A human monster. He came back to see her, but Martie wouldn't sell. Then, when Sara got hold of him, he began to plan his death. I suspect that Sara never found a more willing tool."

wrong just because they'd been treated that way when things were right. Instead, the TR clubbed together against them. No one who had an idea of what Jared and his proteges had done *could* see it, exactly, but when the chips were down . . .

"You protect your own, you wash your dirty laundry with the door closed," Frank murmured, and finished his drink.

"Yeah. By the time the Red Tops played the Castle County Fair, the little community down by the lake had begun to break up—this is all according to Jo's notes, you understand, there's not a whisper of it in any of the town histories.

By Labor Day the active harassment had started—so Royce told Jo. It got a little uglier every day—a little scarier—but Sam Tidwell flat didn't want to go, not until he found out what had happened to his sister and nephew. He apparently kept the whole family there in the meadow even after the others had taken off for friendlier locations.

Then someone laid the trap. There was a clearing in the woods about a mile east of what's now called Tidwell's Meadow—it had a big birch cross in the middle of it. Jo had a picture of it in her stada. That was where the black community had their services after the doors of the local churches were closed to them. The boy—Janier—used to go up there a lot to pray or just to sit and meditate. There were plenty of folks in the township who knew his routine. Someone put a leghold trap on the latter path through the woods that the boy used. Covered it with leaves and needles."

"Jesus," Frank said. He sounded ill.

Probably it wasn't Janier. Devere or his logger-bosses who set it, either—they didn't want any more to do with Sara and Sam's people after the murders; they kept right clear of them. It might not even have been a friend of those boys. By then they didn't *have* that many friends. But that didn't change the fact that those folks down by the lake were getting out of that place, scratching at things better left alone, refusing to take no for an answer. So someone set the trap. I don't think there was any intent to actually kill the boy, out to make a name. Maybe see him with his foot cut off, condemned to a lifetime crutch? I think they may have gotten that far in their imagining.

that if they dug up the bodies and reburied them where it happened, things'd go back to normal for them."

"Did Jared go along with the idea?"

"According to Jo's notes, by then they never went near him. They reburied the bag of bones—without Jared Devore's help—where I eventually dug it up. In the late fall or early winter of 1902, I think."

"*Sat her out to be dead*, didn't she? Sara. Back where she could really work on them."

"And on the whole township? Yes, Jo thought so, too. Enough so she *had* to want to go back to Sara. Laughs once she's out and some of this stuff out. Especially when she guessed she was pregnant. When we started trying to have a baby and I suggested the name Kara, how that must have scared her! And I never saw."

"Sara thought she could use you to kill Kyra if Devore played out before he could get the job done—he was old and in bad health, after all. Jo gambled that you'd save her instead. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And she was right."

"I couldn't have done it alone. From the night I dreamed about Sara singing, Jo was with me every step of the way. Sara couldn't make her quit."

"No, she wasn't a cutter. Frank agreed, and wiped at one eye. "Would you know about your twice great aunt? The one that married Auster?"

"Bridget Noonan Auster," I said. "Bridget to her friends. I asked my mother and she swears up and down she knows nothing, that Jo never asked her about Bridget, but I think she might be lying. The young woman was definitely the black sheep of the family—I can tell just by the sound of Mom's voice when the name comes up. I have no idea how she met Burton Auster. Let's say he was down in the Proctor's Neck part of the world visiting friends and started flirting with her at a clam bake. That's as likely as anything else. This was in 1884. She was eighteen, he was twenty-three. They got married, one of those hurry-up jobs. Harry, the one who actually drowned Kato Tidwell, came along six months later."

BAG OF BONES

So he was but, by seven, an even number, and he was
God."

And, by then his mother, and the other women, would
 shed their tears and go to work, and the children would
 cry. Any other questions? Frankly, yes, I would like to

For several moments he said nothing, then he said, "Two others. Do you mind?"

'I guess it's too late to back out now. What are the

The Shape you speak of. The Outer. I've read it.

I said nothing. It troubled me, too.

"Do you think there's a chance it might come back?"

"It always does," I said. "At the risk of sounding pompous, the Outsider even usually comes back to us after he does it. He brings bags of bones. And the Outsider—Frank the Outsider—always stays in the bag."

He mailed this over then said, "well then yes it is." So I said,

"You had one other question?"

"Yes," he said. "Have you started writing again?"

I went upstairs a few minutes later, checked K again, and then checked K again, then climbed in bed from where I had been and look out the window at the race, and saw things I had never

Have you started writing again?

No. Other than a rather early, easy, low-key vacation which I may show to Ken's satisfaction, nothing. I know that Harv is not, is a creature that has to call him and I'll find out that a creature that which ran so sweet for so long has stopped. It isn't broken - this memory came out with many a gasp of loss and it was not stopped just the same. It is a loss, a loss that is not and the battery bats out the wires and starts to run. I'll do my head. I've put a hard overcoat on it and I don't like to think of it getting dusty.

Some of it has to do with the way M... works. I
some point this out that I... with this and this...

my books, and popular fiction is heaped with other examples of the same thing. Have you set up a moral dilemma you don't know how to solve? Is the protagonist sexually attracted to a woman who is much too young for him, shall we say? Need a quick fix? Easiest thing in the world. When the story starts going sour, bring on the man with the gun. Raymond Chandler said that, or something like it—close enough for government work, *kenn sabe*.

Murder is the worst kind of pornography, murder is let me do what I want taken to its final extreme. I believe that even make-believe murders should be taken seriously, maybe that's another idea I got last summer. Perhaps I got it while Mattie was struggling in my arms, gushing blood from her smashed head and dying and still crying out for her daughter as she left this earth. To think I might have written such a hellishly convenient death in a book, *even*, sickens me.

Or maybe I just wish there'd been a little more time.

I remember telling Kai it's best not to leave love letters around, what I thought out didn't say was that they can come back to haunt you. I am haunted anyway—but I will not wilfully haunt myself, and when I closed my book of dreams I did so of my own free will. I think I could have posted you over those dreams as well, but from that I stayed my hand.

I've seen things I never expected to see and felt things I never expected to feel—not the least of them what I felt and still feel for the one sleeping down the hall from me. She's my little girl now, I'm a big guy, and that's the important thing. Nothing else seems to matter half so much.

Thomas Hardy, who supposedly said that the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is out of a bag of bones, stopped writing novels himself after finishing *Jude the Obscure*, and when he was at the height of his narrative genius. He went on writing poetry for another twenty years, and when someone asked him why he'd quit fiction he said he couldn't understand why he had tracked with it so long in the first place. In retrospect it seemed silly to him, he said. Pointless. I know exactly what he meant. In the time between now and whenever the Outer Dark remembers me and decides to come back, there must be other things to do, things that mean more than these shadows. I think I could go back to clanking

BAG OF BONES

chains behind the Ghost House with bones in the air

I've lost my taste for specks. I like to see a Martini

Bartleby in Melville's story

I've put down my server's pen. This is my last one

Cheer Lloyd Beane

May 25th, 1997 February 1st 1998

STEPHEN KING was born in 1947, an English-born writer in the state of Maine, attending the University of Maine at Orono, where he met his wife, the novelist Tabitha King. The next year, 1965, when he was nine years old, the teenage King wrote his first story, and ever since each time he finished one, Mr. King was teaching him to write, which was his first novel, *Carrie*, was accepted for publication. He has written and published more than thirty novels and short stories, including *The Stand*, *It*, *Dead End*, and *The Girl on the Train*. His stories have been collected in two volumes with other authors. In 1999, Number 1 has been used in a story in the novel *Carrie*, *Volume 1*, and *Volume 2*. *Carrie* has been nominated for an Award nomination. His most recent work, *The Girl on the Train*, began when he was in college, and it was the first of his books. Among many honors of his work, he has won the O. Henry First Prize Award for his short story, *The Black Swan*, and in 1997 the Pulitzer Prize for his work. He has also received support of writers, writing, and reading. He has played that in his first and second novels, *Carrie* and *Volume 1*, and has a hand of writers that perform some of the most important work to promote literacy. Year after year, he has been named as a Sox to win the World Series.



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